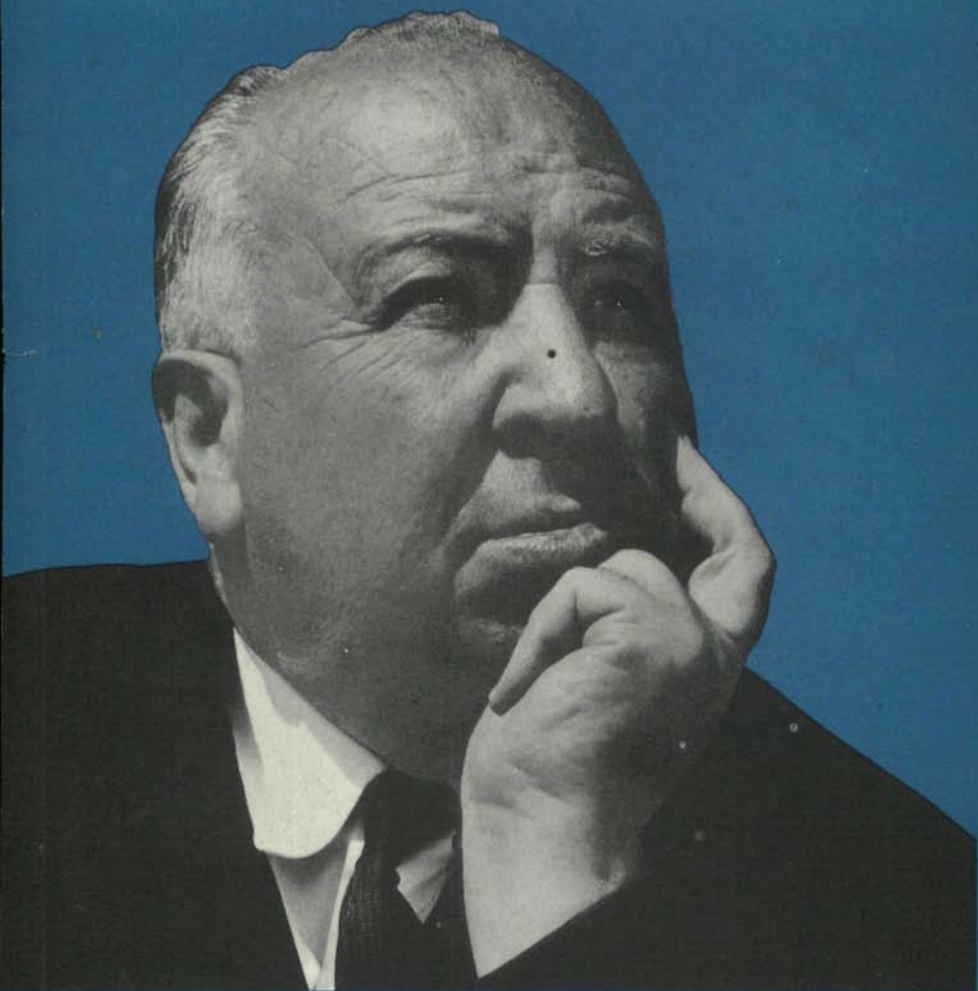


ALFRED

SEPTEMBER 50¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

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Dear Reader:

If I appear to strike a scholarly pose, cover-wise, it could be due to the approach of the traditional school year. However, I have been contemplating the scholastic backgrounds of the persons you will meet in the following pages.

I myself can perceive, without further exposition by the authors, where all could well have attended the finest institutions in the land—or soon will. That comment may be interpreted to fit each case individually.

Learning goes on incessantly, but there is often a hitch in the process. Meanings are lost or twisted. All around us are those who study well-known murder cases, finally consider themselves erudite, but then are tested by an electric chair and flunk.

Scholar or not, those herein have learned their varied lessons admirably, and are evenly matched in competition for your affection. You may dismiss their degree of book learning and grade them all on their current achievement. I did, and found not one failure in the group, no matter their fate.

Alfred Hitchcock

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Richard E. Decker, Publisher

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Patricia Hitchcock

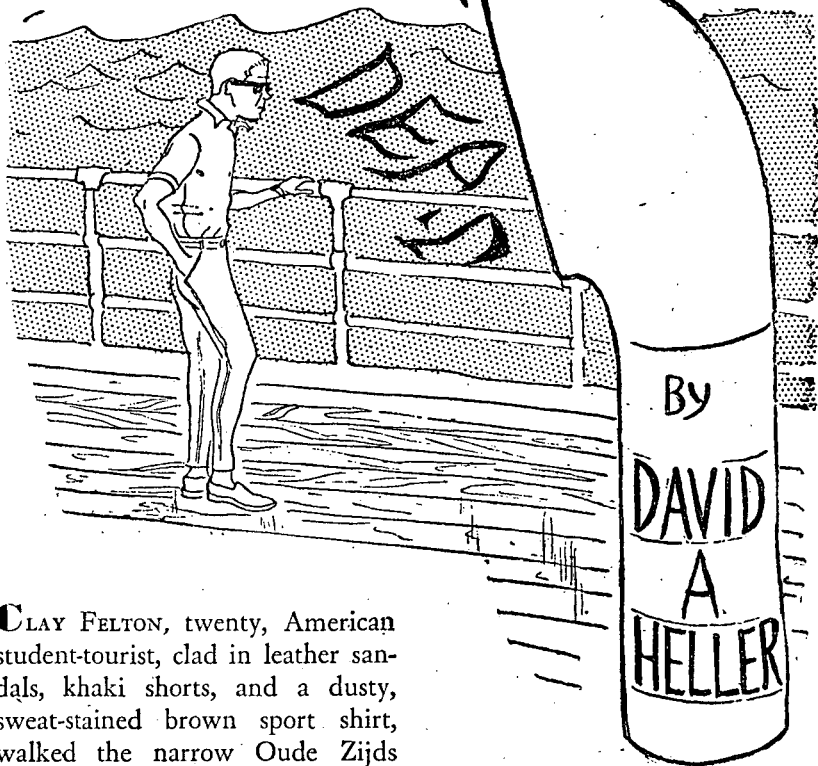
Marguerite Blair Deacon

Associate Editor

Art Director

World travelers encounter all manner of interesting people, and one's look-alike can be nothing less, provided the meeting is timely.

RICH--OR



CLAY FELTON, twenty, American student-tourist, clad in leather sandals, khaki shorts, and a dusty, sweat-stained brown sport shirt, walked the narrow Oude Zijds Voorburgwal of Amsterdam in discouragement. He had hoped to

find in the Zeedjik district a cheap pension for the night, but the tourist season was in full swing in Amsterdam, and anything he could afford—certainly no more than eight guilders, about two dollars and a quarter—was filled. For nearly three months, Clay had knocked around Europe on a very inadequate budget, traveling on third class coaches, cycling, staying in youth hostels, sometimes sleeping in the haystack of an agreeable farmer. Still, his money had not stretched quite far enough. He had less than ten dollars in his pocket, with three and a half days before his ship, *Groot Vreeling*, the last student ship of the season, sailed from Amsterdam for New York. Yet it had been a good trip. Next year it was graduation from college, and then probably the army for him. Clay was glad he had been able to spend a summer in Europe on what he had been able to scrape together.

Clay philosophically shrugged. Something would turn up. It always had. He was hungry, for he had not eaten since lunch, and then only coffee and two *broodjes*, the small, open-faced sandwiches that are offered everywhere in Dutch cafes and food shops. He had decided to skip eating an evening meal to save money. By the most stringent economy, he would

barely be able to hold out until his boat sailed for America.

Clay turned off the Oude Zijds Voorburgwal onto a dimly lighted sidestreet. The narrow thoroughfare was dank with the dampness that comes late at night from Amsterdam's canals, and evil-smelling. Prices ought to be cheaper here. Perhaps he could find an upstairs place where he could afford to get a room for the evening. Otherwise, it would be sitting up all night in the railroad station for him. His luggage was checked at the railway station so he could search for a room unencumbered. Clay shrugged his broad shoulders and ran a hand through pale blond hair. In spite of his natural optimism, he was discouraged. The prospect of spending a night in any of the dives he had seen, even though he had been turned down because they were full, was not something to anticipate. Anything he might find would be worse.

Clay paused by the darkened door of a cheap roominghouse. Abruptly, a hand suddenly grabbed his arm and pulled him inside. His first reaction was that he was being robbed, and he struggled free. Then he saw that the hand that had grabbed him belonged to a woman, a woman of the Zeedjik, dressed in a flimsy-red kimonó.

The woman hissed to him in English, "Do you want someone to see you? Come in! The police could be just around the corner!"

If Clay had been thinking clearly he would have resisted, but he was startled, and his native Tennessee courtesy did not permit him to strike a woman. Before he quite realized what was happening, she had pulled him inside but paid no attention to him until she had locked the door. The window shade was drawn.

Then her manner abruptly changed. She turned to inspect him critically. "Your disguise is good, Eric. Very good. You *do* look like a down-at-the-heels American student traveler."

Startled, Clay fought back the involuntary smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Well, I do my best to look authentic."

"You have done well. Klaas will be pleased. I shall tell him how good your disguise is. Wait, I will bring your package and your money." Then the woman in the red kimono vanished into another room.

Dazed, Clay Felton sat on the edge of the bed. Slowly, his mind began to work. It occurred to him that he had accidentally blundered into a dangerous situation. It was obviously a case of mistaken identity, and the terror at being ob-

served by the police puzzled him. The police do not bother the women of the Zeedjik—or their customers. No, this must be something much more than that. Clay was sorely tempted to get out but, before he could escape, the woman returned.

Involuntarily, Clay found his eyes drawn to the young woman's face and body. She appeared to be about twenty-five, with a hard look, but different. She belonged to the underworld, but she was almost stunningly beautiful. Her air, the way she walked, spelled money, big money. She was red-haired, with finely-etched nose and chin, an elegant mouth, and unblemished skin. Clay found himself staring at her, open-mouthed.

The woman read his thoughts and flushed slightly. Unconsciously, she drew the folds of the wispy red kimono more tightly around her.

"It was too dangerous to give you the delivery at the hotel," she said simply. "The hotel is being watched. I had to pretend to be a woman of the Zeedjik for this one night."

Clay Felton nodded. "Good idea."

"Here's your money. Count it, please, so there will be no question of a mistake. The rest you will receive when the delivery is made

in America." She handed him a thick packet of Dutch currency.

She obviously expected him to count the money—so he did. It amounted to five thousand Dutch guilders—about fourteen hundred dollars, American.

"Here's what you are to deliver. Just put it in your baggage, but be very careful with it, please."

To Clay's astonishment, she handed him a pair of souvenir Dutch wooden shoes. He turned them toward the light. The wooden shoes were varnished, with decals of garlands of brightly-colored tulips, and a Dutch boy and girl holding hands. In English, each shoe carried the legend, *Amsterdam, Venice of the North*. Both wooden shoes were filled with Dutch chocolates wrapped in gold foil. The shoes were tied together and covered with cellophane. Similar chocolate-filled wooden shoes were on sale at every souvenir shop in Amsterdam for about two dollars a pair. Clay wondered what this special pair contained—heroin or diamonds?

"Clever. Shouldn't attract any attention at Customs."

"They won't. There is no risk for you."

I'll bet, Clay thought, but he said nothing.

"You'd better leave quickly. I'll show you out the back way."

Clay gazed speculatively at the scantily-clad woman. She was very attractive.

"Hurry!" she urged him. "Every minute you are here, there is danger. You could be killed."

Clay did not reply. He thrust a hand into the pocket of his khaki shorts, drew out a package of cigarettes and offered her one, which was nervously refused. Then he lit a cigarette for himself. He gazed at her speculatively.

"Pity. Such an exotic place, such a beautiful woman. One should take advantage of life's opportunities, don't you think?"

The attractive, red-haired woman flushed and drew the red kimono tighter around herself. However, to Clay, she did not seem especially displeased. It had been his experience that women are more apt to be displeased with the man who does not make a pass at them than with the one who does.

"Don't be a fool, Eric. Your boat leaves in two hours."

"I'll make the boat in plenty of time." He wondered which boat it was that left in two hours. He seized her by the waist.

"No! Please don't! Klaas would kill you—and me—if he dreamed you laid a finger on me." The girl's eyes were blue and very wide open. She spoke with genuine ter-



ror, her voice rising to a squeal. Clay wondered who Klaas was, but he smiled knowingly. "You can't very well put up much of a fuss then, can you? And then there's the police. You wouldn't want to attract their attention, would you?"

Without waiting for her to answer, Clay drew her toward him, but she turned away. Perhaps she feared that every moment was dangerous and only wanted to get rid of him as quickly as possible. On the other hand, it might have been masculine vanity, but he felt that she did not object nearly as much as she pretended. Her blue eyes were shining, and Clay imagined she was not at all displeased to think herself as femininely irresistible. Nevertheless, she led him up a crumbling back stairway and let him out into the black, deserted street.

Clay turned toward the railroad station, but had gone only three blocks when he came upon a crowd of people cluttered about the Zeedjik Canal. Searchlights from police boats stabbed fingers of white light through the black night. They were dragging the canal for something. Lost in the crowd, he waited. A few minutes later, the grappling hooks pulled the body of a man to the surface. Heavy weights were tied to a

metal chain looped about the bare knees. Foul, oozing mud covered the face and eyes. A gasp of horror swept the crowd. The corpse's throat had been hideously slashed so that the head was barely attached. Clay Felton noticed something else. The corpse had light blond hair, wore khaki shorts, leather sandals and a sport shirt, and looked like an American college student.

His first impulse was to hide. It might be dangerous even to walk the few blocks to the railroad station. Instinctively, he headed into the darkness toward a bridge. In Europe, the poorest of the poor sleep under bridges—and they are seldom bothered. Running into the darkness, he found a deserted area, and then clambered under the supports of one of the innumerable bridges that dot Amsterdam.

Presently, for he had not eaten and was famished, he tore the celophane from one of the wooden shoes filled with chocolates. Biting into the candy carefully, the chocolate cracked off, and a sparkling, gleaming diamond was in his hand. In the two wooden shoes there were twenty-four chocolates—and twenty-four diamonds.

Clay Felton sat hunched up in the musty dampness under the bridge and did the hardest thinking of his life. The idea of being a

thief had never seriously occurred to him before. Now, however, he was in possession of a fortune. The gleaming diamonds, which he carefully placed in his money belt, made him feel like a walking branch of Tiffany's. If he could get the diamonds safely into the United States, he would be rich. If he could not, he was dead. It was that simple. The murder of the man dragged out of the canal was proof that diamond smuggling was a deadly business. Not only the smuggling ring, but also the police, would be combing Amsterdam for the murderer.

Clay had no way to prove his innocence. No alibi. He did not know a soul in Amsterdam. No one could vouch for his whereabouts at the probable time of the murder.

What was worse, the smugglers could realize their mistake.

So it all boiled down to a place to hide.

Where *could* he hide? Hole up in a cheap hotel for three days? No. Cheap hotels would be the first place they would look. Gradually, the outline of a bold plan formed in Clay's mind. Thinking hard, he went over it and over it and over it again in his mind. Then, bone-weary, sleep gradually overcame him. There was nothing he could do until morning, any-

way, and he needed the rest.

The noises of Amsterdam's early morning traffic awakened him, but Clay did not venture out from his cranny underneath the bridge until swarms of people were on the street, hurrying to work. Then he felt it safe to melt into the rushing throng. His first step was to take a tram to the railway station. Then he bought a Dutch newspaper, glanced at it, saw that a picture of the murdered man was on the front page. He wanted to read the story, but could not make out the language. Anyway, he was in a hurry, with more important things to do.

Clay reclaimed his baggage from the luggage room, went into the men's room, washed quickly, and ran a comb through his disheveled hair. Then he went into a pay lavatory, took his wrinkled blue suit from the valise, and put it on. Wrapping his faded khaki shorts, sport shirt and sandals in the Dutch newspaper, he waited until nobody was looking, then dumped the bundle into a trash container. Examining himself in the mirror, he was partially satisfied. Then he rechecked his luggage.

The next step was to find a barber. Explaining that he wanted a shave was easy, but trying to get the idea across to a Dutch barber that he wanted an unfamiliar crew

haircut was harder. Somehow he managed. Next, Clay walked down the *Damrak* until he found an optical shop. The clerk spoke English, so it was not difficult to explain that he had lost his glasses and needed a pair to replace them for reading. No, he was sorry he did not remember the prescription. Clay glanced at some eye charts, and the clerk gave him a weak prescription that magnified objects only slightly. After selecting a dark, horn-rimmed frame for his glasses, Clay looked at himself in the mirror and was satisfied that a dramatic change had been made in his appearance. He paid for the glasses with one of the bills the red-haired girl had given him. There was much change. One thing he did not have to worry about now was money.

The next stop was a famous men's clothing store on Dam Square where he selected a conservative outfit and emerged from the changing rooms wearing his new apparel. As an afterthought, he bought a hat to cover his light blond hair.

Clay hailed a cab and went next to the V.V.V., Amsterdam's official tourist organization, where he requested a room at the Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky. His luck was good. The clerk was able to get him a reservation, so Clay went

across the street to the railroad station, reclaimed his checked luggage, and was registered in the Krasnapolsky fifteen minutes later.

Next came a hot, soaking bath. Then he called room service and ordered breakfast: ham and eggs, toast, a jar of good Dutch jam, and a pot of black coffee. Stretched luxuriously on a soft, clean bed, Clay decided that if he might die, he was going to live first class while he could. After eating, he fell into an exhausted sleep.

Waking, he ventured into the lobby of the hotel, bought the Paris edition of a New York paper, then went into the dining room and ordered lunch. While waiting for his steak, Clay leafed through the pages of the newspaper. On page four he found what he was looking for:

AMERICAN SLAIN IN AMSTERDAM

The mysterious slaying of a young American, Eric Phelan, 23, has created a sensation in Amsterdam. An anonymous tip yesterday led police to drag an indicated section of the Zeedijk Canal. Phelan's weighted body, the throat cut, with knife wounds apparently indicating torture before death, was recovered last night.

Rumors, on which police re-

fuse comment, connected Phelan with diamond smuggling operations between the Netherlands and the United States. Last week U.S. Customs officials closely questioned Phelan about his activities, but there was no arrest for lack of evidence. Unofficially, Phelan's death is believed to have been caused by a rival smuggling gang . . .

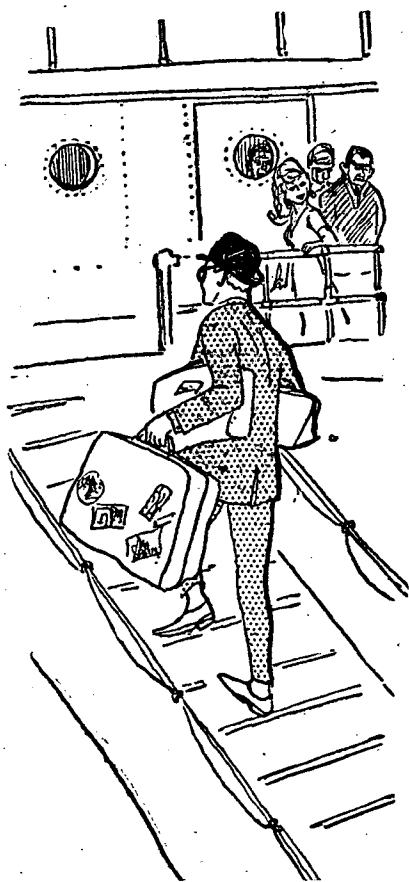
Since there are swarms of tourists in Amsterdam at all seasons of the year, Clay decided that his best disguise was to hide out in plain sight—taking on the protective coloration of the sightseeing tourist. He bought a guidebook and systematically pursued the tourist sights of the city: the magnificent Rijks-museum, with its many Rembrandts, the Stedelijk Museum, which has hundreds of Van Gogh canvases, the Rembrandthuis, the home of Rembrandt, the tropical plant museum. For three days, Clay haunted museums and art galleries, and nobody paid the slightest attention to him.

The *Groot Vreeling*, upon which Clay Felton was to return to the United States from Amsterdam, has a reputation as a "student ship." Those who have sailed it describe it as a kind of floating madhouse. It has few comforts.

Commercial and well-heeled passengers seldom travel it. Its appeal is economy, the cheapest way to get between Europe and America. Most of its space is booked months in advance. The cabins are packed with seven hundred college students, three or four to a tiny cabin, though a few higher-priced staterooms often go begging. Clay considered getting a stateroom or changing his reservation to fly back, but decided to do nothing that might attract attention to himself, like canceling one reservation and trying to get another.

He checked out of the Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky and arrived at the pier by taxi. An enormous mob of students milled about, but he saw nothing suspicious. For a brief moment he was exultant. He had made it! Then, as he walked down the pier, his heart sank. Far down, the red-haired woman was standing beside the embarkation gangplank. Beside her stood an enormous fat man in a dark suit and two tall, muscular men who had gangster written all over them.

Clay was panic-stricken. Had they found out about him? It was logical that they should check the ship, since the *Groot Vreeling* was the last student ship sailing for the season. The original scheme was to have a smuggler, disguised as a student, take the diamonds across.



The diamonds had been given to someone who resembled a student. Perhaps they were checking students to see if any carried a pair of souvenir wooden shoes filled with chocolates.

Clay tipped a porter to have his baggage taken aboard. Then he turned and walked half a block to a souvenir shop.

"Do you speak English here?"

"Yes."

"Do you have fifty of these?" He pointed to a pair of the wooden shoes filled with chocolates.

"Fifty, sir?" The souvenir man was astonished.

"Yes, I'm doing some public relations work for the New York office of the *Groot Vreeling*. If I buy fifty of these can you have someone stand out front and give them away? But only give them to young men students who can show a ticket for this sailing of the *Groot Vreeling*. A separate gift will be given on board to the young ladies." Clay pulled out several large bills.

"I'm sure it can be arranged, sir."

"Very well. Give me a receipt for my office, please." Felton thought that sounded businesslike. "And remember, say, 'Compliments of the *Groot Vreeling*,' each time you give one away. And give them only to young men students who can show you their tickets."

"You can depend on it, sir."

"This is an experiment. If it builds goodwill for the line, you may get other business in the future."

Clay paid over 375 Dutch guilders, got his receipt, walked a few steps to an outdoor cafe and ordered coffee, then watched as the

fifty sets of chocolate-filled wooden shoes were quickly dispensed.

He chuckled as he thought of the watching four going slightly crazy trying to check all those pairs of souvenir shoes! Then he got in line and calmly walked aboard. The red-haired young woman, the fat man, the two mobsters did not give him more than a passing glance. Wearing a hat, bespectacled, well-dressed, he hardly resembled at all the poor student to whom the diamonds had been given.

Clay's cabin was on C Deck, deep in the bowels of the ship. It bore no relation to the luxury in which he had been living. Two other college-age students were already in the cramped space.

"Hi, I'm Tony McKenzie, Toledo, Ohio." A handsome, dark-haired extrovert grinned at him.

"I'm Clay Felton, Nashville, Tennessee."

"This is Howard Braden. He's from Chicago."

They shook hands all around.

Tony, it quickly developed, was a smooth operator with the girls. He looked Clay over appraisingly, decided he did not have two heads and was socially acceptable.

"How about going up to the bar for a beer?"

"OK," Clay agreed.

As they were walking up the passageway to the Main Deck,

Tony grew confidential. "Clay, I've been circulating around. Making contacts."

"Oh?"

"The best the *Groot Vreeling* has to offer this trip are a couple of belles from Louisville. I've made a date for us to meet them in the bar." Then he added, "Howard's OK, but he's not the type any pretty girl is going to flip over, and we've got to move in fast."

Clay laughed, expecting that he had been made the goat to escort a dog while Tony latched onto the dear, but when he met Janet Neal and Anne Gardner he changed his mind. Janet, a dramatic brunette, and Tony had already begun what was to be a torrid shipboard romance. Anne Gardner was a vivacious honey-blonde, and had green eyes. Somewhat to Clay's surprise, she was also intelligent. Anne seemed embarrassed at falling into the blind date category, but he quickly found himself liking her very much.

Then he glanced up and received a terrifying shock. The red-haired woman from the Zeedijk, her fat, sinister companion, and the two dark-suited musclemen were on board as passengers, probably in one of the expensive state-rooms which the students couldn't afford. They walked slowly through the bar, looking people

over, glancing from side to side.

The days quickly fell into a pattern, with sunning, swimming, eating, dancing, drinking beer, and at night making whatever amorous arrangements the cramped, crowded quarters of the ship permitted.

Clay permitted Tony and Janet to throw him and Anne together. It would not do to be too much the lone wolf, to behave in any way suspiciously. He took Anne swimming and dancing, played shuffleboard with her, flirted with her, kissed her casually on the moonlit deck, flattered her in an offhand, absentminded way. What he was really thinking about—night and day—was the voluptuous redhead and her companions and, above all, how to stay out of their way.

They were thorough and methodical, those four, circulating, scrutinizing everybody, eliminating the possibilities. The red-haired woman was their bird dog. She had a disconcerting way of moving quietly into circles of people and listening to conversation, straining to recognize a certain voice she had heard in the Zeedjik.

Clay was evasive and managed to stay out of their way, but, surreptitiously, he kept following the spectacular figure in tight green stretch pants. His wandering eyes

did not escape Anne's alert notice.

"Who's the redhead?" Clay arched an eyebrow toward the girl he had unexpectedly met that fateful night in the Zeedjik. Anne knew everybody on board. She made it her business to know. She was that kind of girl.

"She's French. Her name is Francoise Bourdon. You seem to find her quite fascinating."

"Who's the fat guy with her?"

"He's her *uncle*," Tony McKenzie broke in, with a meaningful smirk. "His name is De Jongh and they say he's loaded; in the diamond business."

"Everybody who believes he's really her uncle go stand in the corner on his pointed head." Anne was jealous of Clay's sudden interest in the French woman. "I suppose she's pretty—if you like the hard type."

Clay grinned. "I prefer honey-blondes with green eyes, myself." Then he added, "Soft and cuddly."

"You're maddening, Clay."

"Why?"

"You keep saying things like that to me—and then you never do anything about it."

It took Francoise Bourdon and De Jongh exactly five days, fourteen hours, and thirty-eight minutes to find him out. There was a bull session around the postage-

stamp-sized swimming pool. Clay was flirting in an absentminded way with Anne Gardner, and they were all talking and laughing. He had not even noticed Francoise, in her sexy scarlet bikini, standing behind him, carefully listening.

Then he turned suddenly and, looking straight into Francoise's blue eyes, realized at once that she recognized him.

After that, it was just a matter of time before Francoise skillfully maneuvered him alone. He was standing by the railing when she quietly moved beside him. "Hello, Mr. Felton."

Startled, Clay turned to see the red-haired Francoise smiling pleasantly at him: "Remember me?"

Clay recovered as quickly as he could. "Of course—from the pool,"

The scarlet mouth continued smiling. "And also from the Zeed-jik, Mr. Felton. You told me—what were your words?—that I was beautiful. How unflattering to be forgotten so soon!"

Clay was too startled to deny it. Besides, denials were obviously useless.

Francoise was gay and cheery about giving him the bad news. "There is little time to waste in idle conversation, chérie. I remember your voice quite well. I must compliment you. You have—how do you say it?—a bedroom voice."

"What happens next, Francoise?"

"Ah, you have taken the trouble to learn my name! How gallant."

"I remember you very well, of course."

Clay saw a flicker of interest flash across her eyes. It would do no harm to flatter her a little. He was in a very tough spot.

Abruptly, Francoise's manner changed to great seriousness. "What a charming boy! How sad that you must soon die, unless you are very clever and do exactly what Klaas asks you to do. You must realize that you are in grave danger. You have put us to a very great deal of trouble." There was no hint of the former light mockery.

Speculatively, Francoise's blue eyes gazed at him, almost with affection. "You are lucky, chérie, very lucky. More lucky than any man I have ever known."

Clay shrugged. He didn't feel lucky. "Why?"

She turned light and gay again. "First, because, quite by accident, you happen to remind me of a sweet boy I once loved. That was very long ago, before many things happened." For the briefest of moments a shadow of unutterable sadness flickered over Francoise Bourdon's face. "Because of that, I have interceded with Klaas on your behalf. Second, and more im-

portant, you are now in a position to be useful to Klaas. But do not push your luck too far. Klaas is in the bar. He wishes to speak with you. Agree to do exactly what he says if you wish to live."

Francoise slipped her arm through his. They walked into the bar, smiling and chatting like old friends. Anne Gardner saw them and turned her face away.

Klaas De Jongh rose to greet him. They shook hands quite cordially. Clay saw the fat underworld figure eying him with interest. The two dark-suited strongmen were also sitting at the table. De Jongh ordered a round of martinis, and then got right to the point.

"The diamonds, Mr. Felton. I want them back. Most ingenious of you to have murdered the late Mr. Eric Phelan and taken his place. But, of course, you can't possibly get away with it. I have business associates in New York. I assure you, you won't live a day after we reach port—unless you wish to come to an arrangement with me."

Klaas De Jongh purred the words in a soft, barely audible whisper. The menace was the more terrifying for its matter-of-fact tone.

Clay shook his head. "I didn't murder Phelan. That was somebody else."

De Jongh mopped his fat face

with a fine linen handkerchief, and smiled through yellowed teeth. "Perhaps so. I have business rivals."

"I didn't do it."

Klaas raised a fat hand. "It's immaterial—to everyone except poor Eric, of course. And to the police. What is important now is that I had a business arrangement with Eric. I should like to persuade you to carry it out."

"What was the arrangement?"

"Ten thousand American dollars, Mr. Felton. Simply take the stones through Customs, then turn them over to me. You will receive ten thousand dollars in cash."

Clay Felton felt flushed and his pulse pounded. "No. That's not very generous, Mr. De Jongh. The diamonds must be worth half a million."

De Jongh smiled. "Let's not quibble over price, Mr. Felton. Make it twenty thousand."

Clay took a deep breath, then gulped down the rest of his martini. "Mr. De Jongh, you've got yourself a deal."

"Splendid." The fat man beamed expansively. Clay imagined that he could've asked for more and gotten it.

"One thing, Mr. De Jongh. Let's not do anything foolish like having me thrown overboard tonight, huh? The diamonds are hidden—

and you still need me to get them through Customs for you—unless you want to do that little job yourself.”

De Jongh feigned shocked indignation. “Mr. Felton! I am a man of honor!”

“Sure.” Clay tried not to make his voice sound too dry. “Well, thanks for the drink. See you tomorrow at Customs.” Clay rose and walked out on deck. For a long time, he gazed at the blue, dancing waves, cut against the ship’s side by the white foam of the vessel’s wake.

It was all a stall to buy time, to live perhaps one more night. Whatever happened, his future looked grim. Clay did not for a moment believe that De Jongh would actually pay over twenty thousand dollars for smuggling in the diamonds. Really, it was as cheap for De Jongh to promise him twenty thousand dollars as ten thousand. Once past Customs, Clay could look forward to the same fate as Eric Phelan. An attempted theft of a half-million dollars worth of gem diamonds would not be forgiven by an international smuggling ring as rich and well organized as De Jongh’s. Also, he knew too much for the gang to permit him to live.

What next? He pondered deeply as he watched the rolling blue At-

lantic. His first impulse was to panic, to hide. He could skip dinner, stay away from his cabin, perhaps hide somewhere in the engine room, or in a lifeboat (he quickly discarded that idea), or some deserted part of the ship, then make a break for it early tomorrow morning.

The problem was that a ship is a cramped, jam-packed floating city in which there *aren’t* any unused spaces. If he tried to sneak into the engine room he’d be as conspicuous as a two-headed calf to the crew, and to hide in some obvious place, like under the canvas of a lifeboat, would be to invite death. De Jongh and his men would be sure to be watching him. If he disappeared, or acted suspiciously, they would come looking. If they ever caught him alone, it would be easy enough for De Jongh’s strong-arm boys to work him over quietly, get out of him where the diamonds were, take them, and then pitch him over the side in the dark of night.

The only safe thing, Clay decided, was to stay in the middle of crowds of people, away from possible lonely passageways or deserted decks. Clay walked back into the bar, was relieved to see that it was filled with people. Glancing around, he saw Tony, McKenzie, Anne and Janet Neal, and a circle

of other students surrounding them.

"Hi, may I join you?"

"Sure. Draw up a chair."

Clay pulled up a chair beside Anne. The talk turned to the captain's farewell party that night, then to the war in Viet Nam, the draft, the Peace Corps, and modern art, the usual things. Anne was enthusiastic about the Peace Corps and planned to join it for two years after graduation from college. A friend of hers had signed up, been sent to Nigeria, and had had many adventures which Anne described as "fabulous."

"Clay! You're not half listening to me!" Anne smiled at him. "Your mind is a million miles away."

"Sorry."

"I've been talking too much."

"No. I like to hear you talk. I was just thinking that a pretty girl like you would be wasted in Nigeria."

She was pleased with the compliment, and he forced his mind to focus on the conversation. If his preoccupation was all that evident, that was bad. He forced himself to act and appear as natural as possible.

Somebody suggested a swim in the pool, but the girls had had their hair fixed for the captain's party, and didn't want to get wet.

"Why don't we have a shuffle-

board tournament?" Anne asked.

It was agreed that everybody would put a dollar in the pot, with the winning team taking all. Clay was pleased with his suggestion. That would keep a crowd together for at least a couple of hours. Then it would be time to go down and dress for dinner. It would be a dirty trick to play on Tony, who would be anxious to get Janet to as many dark corners as possible tonight, but it was his intent to stick to them like glue.

Anne and he played well in shuffleboard and reached the semifinals. Then, as if struck by inspiration, he turned to her: "Tony and Janet are going to the Captain's Ball tonight. Why don't we go with them and double date?"

Anne smiled and said softly, "At last! I thought you'd never ask me."

"I thought you knew I would."

The decks were crowded with people taking the late afternoon sun, and Clay judged it was safe to invite Anne to go for a shipboard stroll with him. They passed De Jongh's two dark-suited men. Involuntarily, Clay flinched. He was honestly scared to death, but tried not to show it.

"Clay, there's something mysterious about you. What's the matter?"

Startled, for he had almost for-

gotten Anne was with him, he turned and really looked at her for the first time. Her eyes were full of genuine concern for him. Touched, he suddenly took her in his arms and kissed her.

"You're in trouble, Clay. Can I help you?"

"No."

"You don't have a wife stashed away someplace—or a girl you're engaged to?"

The unexpected question struck Clay's tortured nerves as hilariously funny. It was, of course, the first question a girl would want to know about, a young man in whom she was interested, but the question touched off in him an uncontrollable impulse to laugh.

Anne bristled. "It's not so funny, Clay. Tell me how I can help you."

Again, Clay was touched. "I can't, Anne. I'm in trouble, but not that kind." Instantly, he regretted the slip, but he was amused by her obvious relief that his problem was not a wife or a fiancée.

"I'll help you in any way I can. I won't ask any questions."

He should not have yielded, but he was near the breaking point. "If you *really* want to help . . ."

"I do."

"Let's go to the ship's library then." Clay led her to the library and writing room, saw that it was

deserted, paused only long enough to get an envelope and several sheets of writing paper, and then led her to a bar half filled with people.

"You have a drink while I write a letter."

Clay addressed the envelope to the Commissioner of Customs, Washington, D.C., and in the letter told the entire story. Then he sealed the letter and handed it to Anne.

"If anything happens to me tomorrow—you'll know if it does—mail this right away in New York. Don't read it. It would be dangerous for you to know what's in it. If nothing happens, I'll get the letter back from you, tear it up, and we'll celebrate by painting the town. Okay?"

"But Clay—"

"You said no questions."

"No questions." Anne put the letter in her purse.

Then Clay suddenly looked around him. He had been so intent on what he was writing that he had forgotten about De Jongh and the two musclemen. They were watching and glaring daggers at him. Unquestionably, they had a good idea what was in that letter, and to whom it might be addressed.

"Anne, give me back the letter."

Anne Gardner thoughtfully glanced at De Jongh and the two

hoodlums, then said, "No, I won't."

"Anne—those men. They've got to see you give me back that letter. You're in serious trouble unless you do. You have no idea how much trouble."

"I can imagine, Clay. But I'm keeping the letter anyway. If anything happens, I'll mail it tomorrow in New York. If nothing does, I'll give it back to you." Anne defiantly stared De Jongh full in the eye—until the fat man dropped his gaze—then said, "It's a kind of insurance for you, isn't it, Clay? If they think I may mail the letter if anything happens to you, it's less likely that something *will* happen, isn't it?"

"At the cost of making it *more* likely that something will happen to you. Give me back the letter."

She would not return the letter and that was that, but people had now begun to stare. Clay grabbed Anne's arm and led her quickly down to the swimming pool, where a group of sunbathers were clustered around. De Jongh and the two men followed.

It was the last day of the trip and several couples, dreading the ending of shipboard romances, were ardently kissing. Clay led Anne to a couple of vacant deck chairs, put his arms around her and kissed her. Then he whispered in her ear.

"Anne, when the next group of

people moves toward the front of the ship, I'm going to walk you to your cabin. Bolt the door and don't let anybody in, not even your roommates. Make them bring the steward to get in. Tonight we've got to stay in crowds of people. We have to have people around us all the time. All the time. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"And, darling, I'm sorry, so sorry, that I've got you involved in this."

"I'm not," Anne said, and gave him a kiss that was full of promise.

That evening was a game of hunter and hunted. They dawdled through dinner, went early to the Captain's Ball and stayed late. All evening long, De Jongh and his hoodlums seemed right at their elbow. Clay could not read De Jongh's mind, but it occurred to him that De Jongh must have just about made up his mind to commit murder and take his chances with Customs. He was a fool if he hadn't, and De Jongh did not impress him as a fool.

Finally, the ship's orchestra played the last note of music. The ball was over. Soon the crowd would be breaking up. What then? The moment Clay Felton had dreaded was approaching. Watching De Jongh from across the

room, he fancied he saw a cat-like look of anticipation on the fat man's face.

Then Anne said unexpectedly in a lilting voice, "Surprise, everybody!" The gay banter hushed. Anne stood up. "Since this is the last night aboard ship, and a lot of us who have grown fond of each other might not see each other for a long time . . ."

A chorus of groans greeted this dismal prospect.

"Some of us girls thought it would be silly to waste the last night sleeping, so we've arranged a deck party . . ."

Cheers.

"The stewards have set up a lot of chairs on the fantail. We thought we'd spend the last night watching the full moon . . ."

Wild cheers.

"We won't go to bed at all. We'll just stay on deck until we dock tomorrow . . ."

Pandemonium.

Anne and Clay led the parade back to the fantail. Perhaps two hundred deck chairs and robes were waiting.

Overwhelmed, Clay turned to Anne admiringly. "You're a pretty clever girl."

Anne smiled brightly. "Oh, you don't know half of how clever I am, darling. I can cook and I can sew and do all of the things that

well brought up young ladies are supposed to be able to do."

She led him to two deck chairs in the center. As they kissed, she whispered, "I don't think those men would commit murder in front of two hundred witnesses, do you?"

"No. It isn't likely."

"Let's forget all about them then, darling."

The long night that Clay had dreaded turned out to be memorable—but in a way he had not expected. As Anne slyly pointed out to him, a good woman can smooth a man's path in unexpected ways.

The *Groot Vreeling* docked at dawn. Plans had been made for Clay to be the first person off the ship. Perhaps he could get the jump on De Jongh and his men. He could get off the boat, pass Customs, disappear quickly, call Anne at her hotel later.

But, after a night of romance, Clay found this was the bleak morning after. De Jongh and his men had anticipated him. They were waiting to debark, too. He was trapped. In the struggling swirl of humanity getting off the boat, Clay found himself next to De Jongh and his musclemen all the way. They surrounded him. He handed in his landing card, showed his passport to Immigration, and displayed his yellow vac-

cination card to the public Health Service man. Then Clay found himself at the head of the line for Customs inspection.

The Customs man, garbed in white shirt and dark tie, smiled pleasantly. "Welcome home. Have you got your luggage ready for inspection?"

Clay smiled weakly. Once past this line, he could be either rich—or dead. "No. I haven't any luggage. I left it aboard ship."

The Customs inspector's smile faded to a puzzled frown. "Aren't you going to bring your luggage into the United States? It must pass inspection if you are."

"No." Clay shook his head.

"Do you have anything to declare, then?"

"Nothing," said Clay, "except a small bag full of diamonds."

The Customs inspector stared at him as if he were a lunatic. Then Clay reached into his pocket, took out the bag, and poured the glittering stones into the astonished inspector's hands.

"These aren't mine. They're the property of that gentleman," Clay

pointed to Klaas De Jongh standing in the next line, "over there."

The inspector glanced at the glittering diamonds, then motioned excitedly to a policeman. "Hold that man!" He pointed to Klaas.

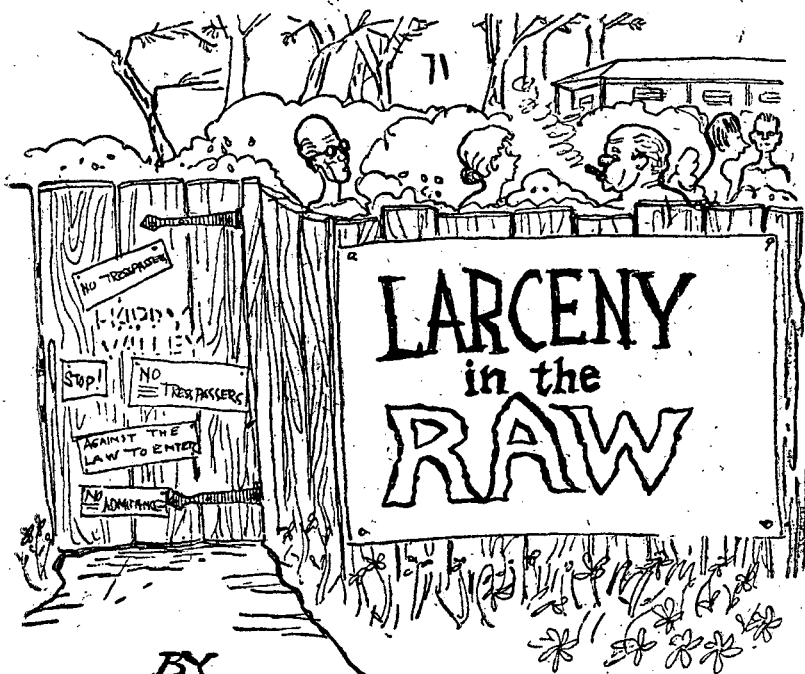
The fat man panicked and began to run. He didn't even reach the end of the pier before he was caught, and Francoise and the two musclemen were subsequently arrested.

There were many questions. It was hours before they released Clay Felton. But there was one item of good news. He had not even known that there is a reward for information leading to the arrest of smugglers and the confiscation of valuable property attempted to be illegally smuggled into the United States. Up to twenty-five percent of the market value of the contraband merchandise, to a maximum reward of fifty thousand dollars, was what the man said. At any rate, it ought to be a tidy sum.

Clay quickly ducked into a phone booth to call Anne. It was time to start planning that celebration.



One can seldom tell a thief by his clothing, and under certain circumstances it is simply impossible.



BY
**DAVID
WEIR**

EARLY Saturday morning of the Labor Day weekend Jim Pierce and Al King, detectives for the Madison County Sheriff's Department, were sitting in headquarters

trying to second-guess the National Safety Foundation when the call came through. Jim, towering in height at six five, listened calmly as the excited voice crackled through the line, then made some notes, thanked the caller and hung up. The big detective turned to his partner and smiled, crow's feet

framing the eyes of his forty-five year old, tanned and weathered face. "Pribble just called again," he said, his voice verging on laughter.

Al, who was in his middle thirties, short and wiry, propped his feet on the desk. "What was it this time? Airplanes, helicopters or the contingent from the lodge with high-powered binoculars?"

Jim brushed a hand through his black, gray-flecked hair. "None of those jokers. It seems that someone has made off with the registration fees of the Third Annual Labor Day Nudist Festival."

Al laughed. "Well, for crying out loud. A little larceny in the raw. How much do they figure?"

"Pribble says about two thousand, but he's not sure yet."

Al whistled softly. "That's grand larceny in any man's nudist colony. When did it happen?"

"Not more than thirty minutes ago. Have George dispatch a couple of cars to cover the two roads bordering the camp. Pribble's already got one of his flock guarding the gate. When you're finished, bring the print case and meet me in the car."

The Happy Valley Nudist Colony was a three acre clearing carved from the thick legions of scrub pines and matted, dense underbrush of the south New Jersey

landscape near Wildwood. Happy Valley's main gate, liberally plastered with legal threats for trespassers, opened onto a narrow, rutted dirt road that snaked two miles to the heart of the camp. The nerve center of the colony was comprised of scattered aged cabins, a concrete meeting hall, shuffleboard and volleyball courts and a swimming pool, which was next to a shelter that provided sanctuary for swimmers in case of invasion by low-flying aircraft or hovering helicopters.

At the helm of Happy Valley stood Easton Pribble. A rather unique appearing man, Pribble was five-four, weighed ninety-three pounds and, due to a young intern's ineptness with forceps, had an abnormally long, narrow head. Clothed, he was mild-mannered, solemn, and dwelt in a rather nondescript personality, but when shorn of society's shackling garments he evolved into the proud, competent and dynamic leader of Happy Valley.

Pribble met Jim and Al near the assembly hall and, considering the official nature of the two policemen's visit, waived Happy Valley's third commandment—"Thou shalt enter Happy Valley clad as thou entered the world." The morning chill was lifting but it still was nippy and the purple tinge of Prib-

ble's skin dictated that the necessary questioning be conducted in the heated hall, the scene of the pilferage.

"Now, Mr. Pribble, tell me what happened this morning?" Jim asked, while Al began to dust the registration table for fingerprints.

The purple hue of Pribble's skin began warming to its normal gray pallor. "Well, the best we can determine is that all the cash was on the registration table when the movie began—"

"What movie?" Jim interrupted.

"One of our members, Mrs. Almond, attended the International Nudist Convention in Copenhagen this summer and filmed her visit. She was gracious enough to show it to us. It was one of the highlights of our Festival."

"How long's the film?"

"Thirty minutes."

Jim jotted down the information, then asked, "Have you figured the loss yet?"

"The preliminary audit shows twenty-five hundred," Pribble said, his mouth curving downward in sadness.

"That's a sizable sum for old Happy Valley, Mr. Pribble. The registration fee must've been pretty high."

Pribble seemed to grow in stature as he began to explain the Happy Valley Labor Day Festival

package deal. "On the contrary. The registration fee was only ten dollars per person. That includes a daily luncheon smorgasbord, poolside refreshments, sleeping accommodations for three nights, shuffleboard and volleyball tournaments, door prizes and two free tickets to the gala Labor Day Ball, featuring dancing to the Zorro Nudist Camp Five. I think our Festival Special is quite a bargain for the price." A blush engulfed Pribble's head. "I produced this year's Festival," he concluded with quiet modesty.

Jim asked several more questions needed to complete his report, then pocketed his notebook and turned to Al, who was being distracted by a ton of feminine flesh clustered near the coffee urn. "When you're finished, Roving Eyes, meet me in the car." Al laughed and Jim turned back to Pribble. "How about a tour of the grounds, Mr. Pribble?"

Pribble escorted Jim from the hall and they began to walk around the edge of the woods bordering the clearing. Pribble's skin was in a color spectrum between gray and light purple when Jim stopped and knelt down to examine a large, wide footprint in the soft earth. He glanced at the surrounding foliage, then stood and continued the tour. The large detective and

his slight host walked from cabin to cabin, around the pool, across the volleyball court and rested on a bench near the shuffleboard court. Jim lifted cigarettes from his pocket, offered one to Pribble, then lit his own. "Mr. Pribble, exactly what did you see during the movie this morning?"

Pribble crossed both arms and legs, seeking a flicker of warmth from his body. "It's not much. I threaded the projector and got the film running, then about ten or fifteen minutes into the film I glanced at the registration table and everything looked all right. I didn't look at the table again until someone discovered the theft."

"Then it appears the money was stolen during a time period of fifteen to twenty minutes," Jim said, and gazed around the grounds. "You think the thief would've fled through the heavy underbrush?"

"Not nude, he wouldn't," Pribble replied, his lips becoming bloodless. "We've let the woods grow thick to discourage outside spectators, especially those sneaks from the lodge hall. He'd be nastily marked if he tried to escape through the woods nude."

Jim pondered. He figured if the suspect had worn clothes to escape it would have taken more than thirty minutes to fight the underbrush and get to the outside roads

bordering the camp. If the thief did attempt to flee through the forest, surely one of the stakeout cars would have spotted him. He discounted the use of the front gate, for one of Happy Valley's citizens had been guarding the entrance since before the theft. Jim leaned back and exhaled a large cloud of smoke. "My guess, Mr. Pribble, is that your moneygrabber is still on the grounds."

"And the money?"

"It's around here somewhere," Jim said, and noticed the involuntary clicking of Pribble's teeth. "Come on, let's get you some warm air."

In the business office at the assembly hall Pribble and Jim went through the registration list of the Festival. "You're sure you know all the people on the list?" Jim asked, after they'd finished a run-down for the second time.

"Oh yes," Pribble replied with positive tone. "They're all members and supporters of Happy Valley. However," he said hesitantly, "I don't know Mrs. Almond's guest as well as I should. He's been here only once before."

"Would you point him out, please?"

Pribble stood and walked to the door, a red imprint of the contour wooden chair etched on his posterior. "That's him reading the bul-

letin board," Pribble said, pointing.

Three men stood in front of the bulletin board, their backs to the office. Two of the men were of average build and girth, but the third was a flabby, broad hulk of a man. Jim thought the three resembled two dots and a dash. "Which one?" he asked.

"The, ah, shall I say the wide one."

The dash turned from the bulletin board, snuffed out a cigar, then returned to his reading. Jim caught a glimpse of the fat face and walked back into the office, a smile brushing his tanned face.

"Something funny?" Pribble asked evenly. "I don't see any humor at all. How am I going to pay for the dance decorations and extra volleyballs, not to mention the Zorro Nudist Camp Five?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Pribble, I'll have your money back and the thief in irons before the gala Labor Day Ball. Now, tomorrow I'm coming out here dressed, or should I say undressed, as any Happy Valley guest to take another look around, and I'm to be treated as one of the flock." Jim sauntered to the door. "I'll call you tonight with instructions. See you tomorrow, Mr. Pribble."

The big detective left the office and went behind the assembly hall and began to search the ground at

the edge of the woods. Ten feet from the back door of the building Jim found what he was looking for, the footprint he had discovered earlier. Kneeling down, he began to comb the grass for a small object he had also noticed earlier, which now, after Jim had seen the fat man in the hall, became of great significance. Several feet from the massive footprint he found it, gray-brown in color and about the size of an average man's thumb. Jim pocketed his unique treasure, stood and began to scrutinize the underbrush in the immediate area of the footprint. A minute passed, then he brushed aside a thick bush and noticed several twigs cleanly snapped off a small pine, as if broken by hand. Five feet inside the underbrush was a spot of freshly turned earth. Jim picked his way through the thicket and spread the soft dirt, then plucked a metal box full of cash and checks from the ground. He retreated from the underbrush and headed back to the car.

On Sunday Jim returned to Happy Valley and was blessed with a warm, pleasant day. After disrobing, he stepped from Pribble's cabin, mildly amazed at what an honest cop will go through to get his man. Realizing there were no tall weeds to be found in the clearing, the big detective purged

himself of a brief spasm of embarrassment and began to frolic in the sun with the rest of Happy Valley's entourage. He took a swim, played a magnificent forward on a makeup volleyball team, exposed an area of his body never before caressed by the sun's warm, but irritating, rays and when he finished what he had come for, ended his stay by throwing a shuffleboard match to a very thin lady from Passaic.

The afternoon of the Labor Day Ball Jim and Al, fully clothed and on official business, returned the stolen money to a relieved Mr. Pribble, then journeyed to pool-side and approached a large, bulky man smoking a cigar the size of a small log and sunning himself in a lounge chair. "We've got a warrant for your arrest, Phil," Jim said, smiling.

"What are you guys talking about?" the obese hulk said, and struggled from his chair.

Jim grinned at the 280 pounds of sunburned flesh. "We're talking about Phillip Jenetti, alias Fat Phil Jensen, ex-con, graduate of Sing Sing and numerous reformatory prep schools. Also minor hood in the syndicate, and the only male guest at Happy Valley who smokes Carona Carona cigars that, I might add, run a buck a copy."

"So what? I happen to enjoy the

finer things in life, and why not?"

"Your Festival host, Mr. Pribble, ran a little independent survey and found you're the only one here who indulges in the finer forms of tobacco. You indiscreetly left one of Mr. Carona's butts near the stash, Phil, and you also left one of your elephant-sized footprints. There's no one around here with feet that big, with the exception of a black bear or a peeping tom."

Fat Phil's massive carcass flushed in anger. "You got nothing on me," he snapped. "I know the new law, Esco-what's-his-name, and there's nothing in the parole regulations against being a nudist. You need proof, boys, and all you've got is circumstantial evidence."

"Circumstantial's good enough for now," Jim said. "Get dressed, Phil, we're going into town. I've got something you might be interested in."

At headquarters, Jim read Fat Phil's constitutional rights, gave him an opportunity to call his lawyer, then booked the thoroughly overweight suspect on suspicion of grand larceny. The fat thief was led into Jim's office and given a sturdy chair, and Al slid behind a typewriter while Jim began to pace the floor, thinking. "How far did we get on Phil's confession?" Jim asked.

Al read over the paper in the

typewriter. "... 'Mrs. Gloria Almond, unaware of my past record, did in no way assist me' ... et cetera, et cetera ... let's see ... 'I fully planned to retrieve the stolen cash after the Festival and then' ... et cetera." Al read further, then glanced at Jim. "We're just about finished. All we need is the ending."

"Did the lab say they would send up a statement on the cigar butt?" Jim asked, and as Al nodded he continued. "Let's end with the standard, 'I, the undersigned, sound of mind and body, and being under no duress whatsoever, hereby confess committing the unlawful theft of twenty-five hundred dollars in cash and checks from the Happy Valley Nudist Colony on,' et cetera, et cetera. Just fill in the date."

"You're wasting your time," Phil said scornfully. "I'm not signing nothing and I'm not talking. When my lawyer gets here with a writ, I'll be long gone."

The door opened and a young deputy walked in and placed a large envelope on the desk. "Here they are, Jim."

Jim lifted the envelope and let it fall heavily on the desk, then turned to Phil and smiled. "Remember the hood who liked to dress up in women's clothes, Phil? Made a bad mistake and got caught

in a vice raid outside his territory, and couldn't buy his way out. The publicity was horrible for the mob, not to mention his family and friends. The syndicate never forgives or forgets, does it, Phil? He went through ten years of hell for making that mistake and embarrassing the mob. A broken home, constant heckling phone calls, hundreds of practical jokes and the butt of every underworld dirty story from here to L.A."

Jim paused, letting the saga sink into Phil's mind, then he opened the envelope and spread the contents face down on the desk. "They could've put a bullet in his head and it would've been quicker," Jim said, idly, as if he were talking to no one in particular. "But no, they let him live the tortured life and they hounded him for ten years until he couldn't take it any longer. Was it the Chrysler Building he jumped from, Phil? If ever a man was literally embarrassed to death, it was that poor slob." Jim's voice became soft, almost hushed. "He knew one thing before he splattered, Phil. You never embarrass the mob."

Jim picked up one of the twelve eight-by-ten colored photographs he had spread on the desk, then held it so Phil could absorb its full impact. "You might like this photo, Phil. The New York tabloids

sure would. They could caption it, 'New York gangster frolics at Happy Valley Nudist Colony.'" Jim picked up another photograph. "Or how about your wife, Phil? 'Fat Phil Jenson and Mrs. Gloria Almond, seen frequently together, enjoy luncheon at Happy Valley poolside.'" Another photo. "Or how about the boys at Sing Sing? I'm sure they'd get a laugh out of, 'Fat Phil Jenson, prominent alumnus, enjoys game of volleyball at nudist colony.' The papers could touch up a few of these and print them. I'm sure they'd love to have a couple."

Phil grew restive, nervous with each photo that Jim flashed.

"Or how about the syndicate family head in New York? I'm sure he'd like, 'Phillip Jenetti, alias Fat Phil Jenson, hoodlum nude and minor member of the Baracelli family, attends Happy Valley shuffleboard tournament . . .'"

"All right," Phil shouted. "Where'd you get the camera? I watched your every move yesterday. I checked. I was sure."

Jim pulled a box of matches

from his pocket and tossed them to the fat man. Phil's pudgy fingers, the size of large ladyfingers, pushed out the small match compartment. The beady eyes, buried in a mound of flesh, flashed shock as Phil viewed the miniature camera.

"Kind of James Bondish, isn't it, Phil?" Jim said, then laughed.

Phil looked at the ceiling in thought. "How much you want for the negatives?" he muttered.

"No money, Phil," Jim said quietly. "Just your signature. But we'll wait until your lawyer arrives. With him witnessing your signature, even the Supreme Court wouldn't reverse your conviction."

Phil's teeth clenched in fury. His massive, fat body swelled in rage, then collapsed in defeat.

Al placed the finished copy of Phil's confession on the desk. "You wrapped that up nicely, Jim. You ought to celebrate tonight." Al grinned.

The big detective glanced over the confession. "That's a good idea, Al. I think I'll get undressed up and attend a gala Labor Day Ball."



*As Shakespeare so aptly expressed it,
"Who can be wise, amazed, temperate and furious,
Loyal and neutral, in a moment?"*



IN Wyattsville the first week in September traditionally belongs to the Pioneer Society. Everyone dons a costume reminiscent of the early days when the town was the last wagon-train stop on the way to the gold fields, the men grow beards, and there is a kangaroo court held on the lawn in front of the courthouse. The real feature, though, is the rodeo. It draws such a big crowd that any one visitor goes unnoticed. No one paid any attention to a Mrs. John Metcalf who

by Jean Leslie

registered at *The Californian* on September third and checked out on the seventh, the day that Andy Wyatt put a gun in his mouth and blew off the top of his head.

Had he been questioned (which

he wasn't) the desk clerk at the hotel might have remembered Mrs. Metcalf as a soft-spoken middle-aged woman who asked a lot of questions about the town's history. It is possible that old Mr. Pruitt, owner of the variety store, and Miss Tait, an elderly saleswoman in *The Emporium*, also would have recalled her. Both had given her a great deal of information about the leading citizens of the community, especially those who bore the Wyatt name. These seemingly casual conversations were forgotten in light of the shocking news of Andy Wyatt's suicide. No one—then, or later—associated her presence in Wyattsville with his death.

My first knowledge of Mrs. Metcalf came on the morning of September sixth when Velma put through a call to my desk. I heard her say, "Mr. Wyatt is out, ma'am. I will connect you with his secretary." A pleasant voice said, "Hello? Will Mr. Wyatt be in his office later today? I would like to make an appointment to see him."

Wyattsville isn't really "small town" any more but most of us act as though it were, so it was quite natural for me to volunteer the information that Friday was Kid's Day at the rodeo and Mr. Wyatt would be staying for the whole program because he had two sons

and five nephews entered in the various events. To make up for lost time, I said, he would be in his office Saturday and could see her at five o'clock. She had to be content with this, and I noted the time of her appointment on my desk pad and on Andy's.

Those Wyatt boys took a total of eight firsts, three seconds and five thirds; and the biggest barbecue in town that night was at Andy's and Laura Lee's home where there were more than forty men, women and children, not one of whom wasn't a Wyatt by birth or marriage.

In spite of all the celebrating, Andy was in his office at nine o'clock on Saturday morning and worked straight through until one, when John Bartlett came by to take him to the club for lunch and nine holes of golf. My standing appointment at the Delta Beauty Salon always has been for three o'clock on Saturday so before I left the bank I went in and turned on Andy's tape recorder. This is used at my discretion: when I'm not able to be there to take notes, or when my presence in the room would be an embarrassment. I listen to it later and decide what needs to be transcribed. The recorder is in a lower drawer and the pickup is in the desk lamp which always stands just about halfway between Andy's

chair and the one occupied by the person who has come to see him.

On this occasion, quite frankly, I wanted to know what Emil Sondergard would have to say about the route of the new freeway because of a piece of property I own. His appointment was for four-thirty and I was afraid I wouldn't be back in time. As a matter of fact, my roots needed a touchup and it was nearly five when I let myself into the bank. Emil's car was in the parking lot and Andy's door was closed so I sat down and typed a letter to the Chamber of Commerce saying Andy would be glad to pay for three trees on the east side of Sacramento Avenue, "same to be spaced evenly in the 150-foot strip North of Cabrillo Street and parallel with the property owned by the Wyattville Farmers and Merchants Bank."

The big clock over the entrance said exactly five o'clock when Mrs. Metcalf tapped on the glass door and I went through the bank to admit her. She was a trim, well-cared-for fifty or fifty-five; smartly, but not expensively, dressed in a lavender linen sheath, with matching pumps, and handbag, and a bandeau of violets which fitted snugly over her short grey hair. What impressed me most was the fact that she looked cool, which is quite a feat in Wyattville in Sep-

tember. She seemed well at ease.

"Mrs. Metcalf?" I smiled and held out my hand. "I'm Sylvia Sommers, Mr. Wyatt's secretary. You're new in town, aren't you?"

"I've been here a few days."

"One of our new teachers," I guessed.

"Yes. Is Mr. Wyatt ready to see me?" she asked.

"Not quite." I locked the door. "Come back where you can sit down. He shouldn't be long." In my office we talked about Pioneer Week and the marvelous record set by the Wyatt boys, and then the buzzer sounded. Emil Sondergard had left by the door to the parking area, the one we referred to as Andy's "escape hatch", so I took Mrs. Metcalf in and introduced her. "Unless you want anything else, Mr. Wyatt," I said, "I'll leave now."

"Nothing more, thank you." Andy smiled. "Will we see you at the Rodeo Ball?"

"No. Phil's in San Francisco this weekend." Phil Smart is the man who usually takes me to civic affairs.

"You can go with us," Andy suggested.

"Thanks, but no just the same. I'll see you Monday."

I stopped at the supermarket and bought a T-bone steak and a can of asparagus (you develop a thing about the fresh vegetable when you



live where it grows and have to breathe the peat dust) and then walked on to The Delta Arms where I have lived all the years since I went to work as Andy's

secretary. There are newer apartments, with pools and other attractions, but The Arms is within walking distance of the bank and it's air-conditioned. More than any-

thing else, it's sweet home to me.

After fixing a gin and tonic and leaving it to chill, I went in and took a shower and put on slacks and a shirt. It must have been seven-thirty when Laura Lee called to ask if I knew where Andy was. They were already past due for the Bergens' cocktail party and had to be at the Lambertsons' for dinner at eight-thirty. She reminded me (unnecessarily) that it was important they be on time because the dinner guests were all civic leaders whose appearance in time for the Grand March was obligatory. I promised her that I would go down to the bank and see if Andy were still there. I remember saying, "Wherever he is, Laura Lee, I'll find him and send him home."

I found him in his office, but I couldn't send him home. He was sprawled in his chair, staring open-mouthed at the acoustical tile ceiling. Bits of him adhered to the wall behind him and his gun lay on the carpet under his left hand.

Habits of efficiency are a great help in a crisis. The Wyattsville High School's Marching Band was to assemble in our parking lot so I drew the curtains and made sure the "escape hatch" was locked. Then I picked up Andy's phone, which is left with an open line after Velma closes the switchboard, and dialed Chet Bergen's number.

Someone answered and kept shouting "Hello? Hello?" over the background noise of a large and lively party. The answerer either closed a door or carried the telephone to another room because when he spoke again I could hear him distinctly and recognized his voice.

"Doctor Collins?" I said. "This is Sylvia Sommers. Can you come to the bank right away? Without saying anything to anyone? It's very important."

"Andy?"

"Yes. He's dead."

"I'll be there."

"He sure as hell did it himself," Corby Collins said. "Nobody gets a guy to open his mouth and take a slug like that." He looked down at the gun again. "I never knew Andy was left-handed."

"He was taught to write right-handed, but he attended so many service-club luncheons that he had to learn to eat right-handed in self-defense. Actually, he was a south-paw."

"That's right," Dr. Collins nodded. "He played golf and tennis left-handed." He gave a deep sigh. "You might as well call Bill," he said.

Bill Dean is our Chief of Police and one of Andy's oldest friends. I reached him at home. "Bill," I said, "this is Sylvia. I hate to be the

one to tell you this, but Andy committed suicide. Dr. Collins and I are at the bank. Can you come down, alone, without saying anything to anyone?"

I hung up and fumbled in my purse for cigarettes and lighter. "You'd better talk to Laura Lee," I told Dr. Collins. "They already have missed the Bergens' cocktail party, and she's afraid they'll be late at the Lambertsons' dinner." Hearing my own words, I knew I was in a state of shock. "Well, somebody has to tell her *something*!" I said desperately.

"You have to," he said gently. "If I call, she'll get the wind up and think he's had a heart attack. I wish it were only that!" He took a turn around the office and came back to stand in front of me. "Just say he isn't here, and that you'll phone around and see if you can locate him."

"But this just isn't like him!" Laura Lee wailed. "What should I do, Sylvia? Shall I go on or wait here?"

"You'd better wait," I advised. "I'm sure you'll hear something soon."

When I had cradled the phone, Dr. Collins said, "Indeed she will. Poor Laura Lee. I've coped with some heartbroken widows in my day, Mrs. Sommers, but I have a nasty feeling that tonight is going

to set some sort of ghastly record."

"Shouldn't you get in touch with Mr. Tuttle?" I asked.

Corby Collins gave me a quick look of appraisal. "Very good thinking," he said dryly. "Who was it who said that behind every successful man was a clever woman, or words to that effect? Perhaps I'm just now learning what made Andy tick. I assume you know where Mr. Tuttle can be reached."

Incredibly, my watch showed that it was not yet eight. "They will still be at the Whitmans'." As I finished dialing the number there was a sharp, metallic rap on the front door. "That will be Bill," I said, and handed the phone to Dr. Collins.

The street light showed the comfortable bulk of Bill Dean's silhouette. When the door was opened he stepped inside and gripped my hands. "In heaven's name, why did he do it, Sylvia?" he asked.

"I don't know!" I whispered. "That's what makes it so awful. I don't *know*!"

He asked the same question of Corby Collins, and the doctor said, "It wasn't his health. You can rule that out. He had a physical every six months. So did Laura Lee. I checked them in July before they went on their vacation and they were in excellent shape."

There was a peremptory rattling

of the big front doors and I went through to admit Mayor Tuttle. "Where's Corby?" he demanded. "What in hell is this all about? Why'd he call me away from—"

"Andrew Wyatt has committed suicide," I cut in coldly. "Come into his office, please." Addison Tuttle is ruthless and ambitious, qualities which make him a man to be reckoned with, but certainly endear him to no one.

Bill sat with his face in his hands, unashamedly weeping. By contrast, Ad Tuttle walked around Andy, apparently needing to assure himself that Wyattsville's favorite son was no longer a threat to his political future. Satisfied, he turned his long, thin-lipped face toward Corby Collins. "Incurably ill?" he asked.

"No. Nothing so convenient. I just told Bill and Mrs. Sommers that I had given him a complete physical in July and his health was fine."

The mayor's small, pale eyes swiveled around to me. "Anything here at the bank that could be considered—*irregular*?"

"Nothing," I said positively.

"Another woman?" he asked. "Anything like that?"

All of them looked toward me hopefully. "Of course not," I said. "I'm surprised you would even ask."

"But if there had been," he persisted, "you would have known, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose so. I was responsible for his deposits and withdrawals, and there was never a transaction which couldn't have been reported in *The Sentinel*."

"An extramarital relationship doesn't have to involve money," Mayor Tuttle pointed out. "It could be someone we all know."

"In *Wyattsville*?" Dr. Collins' laugh was a short, derisive bark. "It would have been common gossip."

"I suppose you're right," Ad Tuttle conceded. He dragged at the lobe of his ear, then said, "See if there's a bottle in the desk drawer, Mrs. Sommers. All of us could use a drink."

Andy never would have a bar in his office but he kept a fifth available. The bottle was about two-thirds full. I got four paper cups from the dispenser beside the bottled water and the mayor poured two or three ounces into each. There was an awkward pause after we picked them up, and then Bill Dean cleared his throat loudly and said, "To Andy. A really great guy."

"The greatest." Ad Tuttle took his whiskey in one long swallow and dropped the empty cup into the wastebasket. "But dead. Why

did he have to pick the first week in September?" He began to pace up and down the office, his long chin thrust out and up. "What we have to watch now is how this story breaks," he said. "If we can keep it under wraps for a few hours the Rodeo Ball will go off as scheduled. Then if it is in the morning papers, our final day should be terrific! I'll go to the Lambertsons' and talk to Drew," he decided. Drew owns *The Sentinel*. "Good thinking?" He tapped his temple and grinned at us.

"Very good," Corby Collins said. "We've been long on that tonight, if somewhat short on sentiment. I'm going to talk to Laura Lee."

"Do that," Ad urged. "And work out some plausible explanation for them missing the Ball." He did not see the withering glance the doctor gave him because he had turned to Bill. "Ev Grant can be trusted, can't he?" he asked. "Call the mortuary and tell him to pick up the body after ten—*after ten*, mind—when everybody will be in the auditorium."

When I came back from letting Mayor Tuttle out of the building I was grateful to see that Bill had brought the bottle into my office. "You mustn't blame Ad," he said, filling two paper cups. "It's that kind of clear thinking that has made him what he is in Wyatts-

ville. Here," he handed me my drink, "let's you and me drink to the Andy we knew. We can include the high school class of '42 and our first year at Cal, or we can just say the-hell-with-it and drink to get drunk."

Bill and I had gone through school together from kindergarten on, just as Andy and Laura Lee had. The difference was that the two schools were on different sides of the track, so to speak, and we had to go to Wyattsville High before the four of us could rub elbows. Maybe we wouldn't have even then, except that Andy and Bill were outstanding football players and Laura Lee and I were pompom girls. Quite often we doubled after a game and went to a sock hop in the gym or had a hamburger and a malt somewhere. We became a regular foursome when we went to the University. All of us knew plenty of people on campus, but not as well as we knew each other.

Bill and I sat and talked about those days while we waited for ten o'clock and Ev Grant. "That first semester at Berkeley was really great," he recalled. "I guess I was the one that broke us up when I took the night job at the Dixie Diner. It was nice eating regularly, but it sure cut into our dating. And to this day," he added, "I

can't stand ham or yams or cornbread."

"Your working evenings was only part of it," I said. "Remember that Laura Lee spent Christmas vacation with that Tri-Delt from Piedmont and came back sure that she was in love with the girl's brother. How long did that last? Two months? Three?"

"I've forgotten. Long enough for Andy to get into the habit of coming around and crying on your shoulder." Bill finished his drink and stared into the empty cup. "I was jealous as hell. Did you know that? It took a lot of growing up before I could realize that you had been Andy's salvation."

"In what way?"

"If Andy hadn't had a real friend to turn to," Bill said slowly, "he could have dropped out of school, or he could have been snapped up by some smart girl who saw a chance to catch a rich rube on the rebound. You tided him over until Laura Lee came to her senses."

It was while I was consoling Andy that Bill had started dating Rosalie, who also worked the late shift at the diner. Rosie was the daughter of a Fresno farmer and had never been out of the San Joaquin Valley until she received a scholarship to the University. Unsophisticated she may have been,

but she knew a good man when she saw one, and by June she was wearing a little garnet ring that had belonged to Bill's grandmother. By then, too, Andy and Laura Lee were pinned, and I had Sam Sommers' two-carat diamond and a wedding band.

Sam was the finest man I ever knew. We never met on campus because he was in his last year of Law when I was a freshman. It took an afternoon during Easter Week at Carmel to bring us together. Neither of us cared much for jazz or the dates who had brought us there, so we got to talking and then took off on our own. We found a little coffee house in Monterey and, after that, a seafood place. Then we drove for hours through the Carmel Valley, each telling the other all there was to tell. It was dawn before we got back to the apartment where I was staying with five other girls from Cal. Standing beside his car he took my hands in his and asked me to marry him and I said I would and he kissed me for the first time. It was a wonderful marriage, but it didn't last long because Sam was one of the earliest casualties of the war. I stayed with his parents in San Francisco until 1948 when Father Sommers died. Mama Sommers sold their wholesale grocery business then and

went to live with a daughter in Santa Rosa. Having nothing to keep me in the city, I went back to Wyattsville on an exceptionally cold and foggy morning in February. Bill and Andy both had fine Navy records, both had been married for some years, and both had children. That was how things stood when I went to the bank and applied for a job. Luckily, the secretary Andy had inherited from his father was retiring and I took her place.

There was a discreet knock on the door that led from Andy's office to the parking area. "That will be Ev," Bill said heavily. "I'll take care of this part of it."

"Go with him, Bill," I asked.

"Sure. What about you?"

"I have some things to do so that tomorrow won't be too difficult for Laura Lee and the others."

"Don't stay here too long." His big hand closed on my shoulder, and then he dropped his keys on my desk. "Leave these over the sunvisor," he said. "I'll pick the car up later at your place."

I tried to close my ears to the macabre sound of Andy being wheeled out of the bank. Ev left by way of the alley, and then I went through to make sure Bill had locked the escape hatch. Andy wouldn't need it again. Not ever. The room had a terrible, unearthly

stillness now that he was gone. It was then that I became aware of the faint hum of the tape recorder. I turned it off, and then something—cupidity, perhaps—made me wonder what Emil Sondergard had said about the freeway. I rewound the tape, turned up the volume, and heard Andy say, "Is this attempted blackmail, Mrs. Metcalf?"

I went back to the point where he asked me if I was going to the Rodeo Ball and I told him Phil was in San Francisco. There was the sound of a door closing as I left with nothing more on my mind than trying to remember which supermarket had the special on steaks.

Now I heard the faint squeak of Andy's swivel chair as he settled into it. "Well, Mrs. Metcalf," he said affably, "what can I do for you?"

"For me, Mr. Wyatt, nothing." She had a low-pitched voice and spoke in a manner which my mother would have described as "refined". "But for someone in whom we have a mutual interest there is a great deal you can do. What significance does this date have: November twenty-second, nineteen hundred and forty-two?"

After a long pause, Andy said, "None. Should it?"

"Yes. It is the birthdate of an

illegitimate child which you fathered."

"That's nonsense," Andy stated flatly. "The most charitable view I can take of your allegation is that this is a case of mistaken identity."

She went on as though he had not spoken. "The mother's name was Mary Skouros. Six weeks after his birth she relinquished him, and my husband and I adopted him. We chose him for several reasons: he was healthy and handsome, we had confidence in the adoption agency, and paternity had been acknowledged. At that time, Mr. Wyatt, natural parents were not permitted to know where their child had been placed but adoptive parents were given full particulars, including the names of the mother and father. That child is an adult now, and in need of advantages which only you can give him."

"Is this attempted blackmail, Mrs. Metcalf?"

"'Blackmail' is a very ugly word. I prefer to think of this as a mother's earnest effort to assure her son's future. My husband and I took a child you were willing to recognize as yours, but for whom you were unwilling, or unable, to assume responsibility. We had great plans for him, but Mr. Metcalf died when Jack was seven. On a schoolteacher's salary I could not give him many of the things my

husband would have provided. I did, however, see to it that he made maximum use of his abilities and education so that he received an excellent scholarship at Berkeley. He graduated with honors and has a creditable service record."

"I congratulate you," Andy said drily. "Having done so well by this boy, why do you come to me now?"

"Because his incentive has been my promise that I had an old friend with money and prestige who would give him the kind of start which would carry him wherever he wanted to go."

"Does he know he is adopted?"

"No. Nor does he resemble you or any of the other Wyatts. I went to some pains to establish this fact. Here is his picture."

There was a considerable pause and then I heard Andy give a little grunt which might have been an expression of amusement. "No," he agreed, "he certainly doesn't resemble my family. His mother must have had the dominant genes. And now, Mrs. Metcalf . . ." His voice flattened and hardened. ". . . suppose I call this blackmail, whether you like the word or not, and tell you to get the hell out of here! What would your next move be?"

"I would leave, of course," she said quietly, "but I would be back

in a few days, with Jack. I have a teaching position at Wyattsville High School and I am certain Jack could find employment. He's very adaptable. Probably he could sell cars for your brother Conrad, or men's furnishings for Abner Wyatt. There are many possibilities."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?" Andy said.

"I hope so. If, on the other hand, you elect to take him into the bank and advance him in every way possible in this community and this state, I believe he will be a credit to both of us."

"If—if—I give him a job in the bank will you promise to stay out of Wyattsville, Mrs. Metcalf?" Andy's voice was harsh.

"No. Whatever you decide, I will be here to see that my son's best interests are served."

"Of course. I might have expected that." I could hear the little *thud, thud, thud* that meant he was letting a pen or pencil run through between thumb and finger and then reversing it. "If I do anything for this boy," he said, "it will not constitute an admission of any sort."

"No admission is necessary," she reminded him. "Paternity is a matter of record in the form of a letter from the adoption agency which I have in my safe deposit box. Now, please write a letter to Jack which

I have come prepared to dictate."

A drawer was opened and slammed shut, and as she talked I could hear the angry scratching of Andy's pen. "Dear Julia," Mrs. Metcalf said, "It was good to see you again after so many years. I was impressed with your son's records, academically and in the service. I feel sure he can go far in Wyattsville." New paragraph. "He is a very fortunate young man to have a mother so dedicated to his advancement." Sign it, 'Cordially, Andrew Wyatt.'

Andy laughed. It was a curiously light-hearted laugh. "I'm glad you've given his mother full credit," he said. "If he succeeds, I'm sure she will be on hand to take her bows. Now, how do I address this infamous document?"

"I resent that remark." For the first time her voice betrayed emotion. "My life has been devoted to this boy and I see nothing wrong in letting him know he is indebted to me. I intend to be a part of the success he will enjoy, and I expect him to feel that rightly I *should* be!"

"The address, Mrs. Metcalf?"

"Send it to me: Mrs. John Metcalf, Box 1123, San Francisco. I'll mail it before my bus leaves at six-fifty. I have a stamp."

"I was sure you would have."

"This," Mrs. Metcalf said, "I shall

consider a guarantee of your good faith, and I will have no further worry about Jack's future."

"You need have none." Andy's voice had the deadly quality which he reserved for special occasions. "You have the boy's feet planted firmly on the economic ladder and he will be booted up it as high as he is capable of going, not because of any threats you have made; but because he is a Wyatt. Now, *get out!*"

There was some unidentifiable sound—an outraged gasp, perhaps—and then I heard a door close. I leaned over the tape, willing it to yield something more; but there were only small noises—the creaking of his chair, muted car horns from the street, something which might have been an epithet muttered through clenched teeth, and then the opening and closing of a drawer. Ten minutes later there was the sharp report of the gun and the muffled sound as it struck the floor.

I played it all back again and then I went to my typewriter and wrote:

Dear Mr. Metcalf,

No doubt you will hear of Mr. Andrew Wyatt's death before learning that his last act was to assure you of a position with the Wyatts-ville Farmers' and Merchants' Bank. This is a commitment

which the family will wish to honor. Please arrange to be here on Monday, September 14, at 3:00 p.m. for an interview.

There is an excellent opportunity for advancement in this community, and in the years to come I am sure your mother will have reason to be very proud of you.

Yours very truly,

Sylvia Sommers

In the San Francisco directory I found a Mrs. John B. Metcalf and a John B. Metcalf, Jr. listed at the same address on Clay. This seemed appropriate for her income so I sent the letter there. It afforded me satisfaction to imagine her wondering how I knew of her conversation with Andy; how much, in fact, I knew about Jack.

In the safe in Andy's office there was a metal box for which he and I had the only keys. I took it out and went through the contents carefully. There was a considerable amount of cash, an exquisite diamond-and-emerald necklace which Laura Lee had seen and admired and which Andy had subsequently purchased as a surprise for her on her birthday in October, birth certificates for all of them, and two tape recordings which could bring Ad Tuttle's little political empire tumbling down in ruins. I took the tapes, and the things which were mine: the baby's identification

bracelet, a larger one that read "Mary Sylvia Skouros Sommers", a plastic envelope that held a downy feather of dark hair, and the twenty-three stock certificates which had been Andy's penance candles.

He gave me the first seven of them on November 22, 1948. "Money's no substitute for a child," he said bluntly, "but it's one hell of a nice thing to have. These cost \$5000 each." He fanned them out on his desk. "They'll appreciate. Hang on to them, Sylvia, and one day you'll be a woman of property."

"You don't have to do this," I said.

"I know that. Let's say I do it for the same reason I give Laura Lee jewels. She's the only woman I've ever loved, and you're the only one I ever wholly trusted." And then he said, "There'll be another of these each year."

They had appreciated, and I am a woman of property. I put all of these things into my handbag together with the carbon of my letter to Jack, the carbon paper I had used, and the recording made that

afternoon. Whatever was left in Andy's office or mine was anybody's business, and would be tomorrow.

I posted the letter to Jack Metcalf and drove on to my apartment. The night was soft and still, and by contrast my apartment was too cool and too quiet. I turned off the air-conditioner and opened a window. The band at the Auditorium was playing a medley of old, nostalgic tunes, and when the clock struck twelve the musicians drifted into *September Song*. I hadn't cried in more than twenty years, but I cried now with noisy abandon. I wept for dear, good Sam who had begged me to keep Andy's child and had given him a name which I refused to give to the adoption agency; and for Andy, who did not love me but needed me, and who paid—finally with his life—to keep the Wyatt escutcheon unblemished; and for my son, whom I could not claim, and would not again disclaim; to whom I would always be, as I had been to his father, just a trusted and loyal friend.



Standing up against imminent death is not the only way to demonstrate one's mettle.



WHAT impressed me primarily about the two of them was the fact that they pointed guns.

Their light dresses were identical in color and style and bore the unmistakable cut of some public institution—possibly the women's state prison. I learned, in due course, that their names were Irene and Hilda.

I had been transplanting tomato seedlings to my garden when I had looked up and there they were.

Irene's hard green eyes flickered over the house, the garage, and the

By Jack Ritchie

small barn. "Where is your car?"

I thought that over for a moment, then said, "I don't have any."

"Then why the garage?" she demanded.

"It came with the property. I haven't had the heart to tear it down." I glanced covertly at my watch. It was a bit after three. "The Swenson farm is just two miles down the road. I'm certain he will lend you one of his vehicles if you are sufficiently persuasive."

She studied the grounds again. "Who lives here besides you?"

"No one," I said firmly.

She turned to Hilda. "Keep an eye on him. I'm going to take a look around."

There seemed to be no point in simply standing there, so I troweled another hole and set down a seedling.

Hilda cleared her throat. "Our car stopped running about three miles back. We tried a lot of other farms while we walked, but the houses were all empty and run down and no windows."

"Abandoned farms," I said. "After their inhabitants mined the last bit of humus from the soil, they departed to devastate other areas."

Hilda could be described as sturdy and she was possibly in her forties. "The land here is kind of hilly and hard to work with machinery. Maybe that's why some of

them left too?" she added smartly.

I conceded the point reluctantly.

"You don't farm real big, do you?" Hilda asked.

"Just five acres and independence." I glanced toward the house. My shotgun lay against the wall of the front closet, but where the devil had I put the shells?

Irene returned. "How do you explain the tire tracks in the driveway?"

"I had a visitor this morning," I said. "My cousin Alfred."

She studied me coldly. "You live all the way out here alone and get along without a car?"

"I am almost entirely self-sufficient and as for the exceptions, I make a monthly phone call to the general store in Haywood and have my order delivered."

"How far is this Haywood?"

"About eight miles."

Hilda smiled diffidently. "I can drive a car real good. I heard once that people like me are the best car drivers in the world because we concentrate on what we're doing and don't get distracted like some people who are real smart or something like that."

I stared at the mild ingenuous blue eyes for a moment and then understood.

I turned to Irene and pointed down the road. "As I mentioned before, there's the Swenson place

just about two miles from here.” Irene glared. “We just came from that direction. There’s no live farm for at least three miles.”

I sighed. I had assumed that they had come from the north, but evidently they had circled me before making themselves known. There was, of course, no Swenson farm. Momentarily I considered inventing a Lindsey farm to the south, but obviously I would now be met with some skepticism.

Irene cursed softly. “Nothing passed us coming or going. I got the feeling that nobody uses this road.”

That, unfortunately, happened to be just about true.

Her eyes suddenly brightened. “He’s got a mailbox.”

Hilda agreed. “It’s just a plain one, but some people have real fancy ones and I heard that it’s really against the law to make them fancy but nobody enforces it.”

“Listen, dummy,” Irene snapped. “I mean this is the country, and in the country the mailman delivers mail by car. So we just wait until he shows up and take his car.”

Hilda nodded. “That’s right, Irene, but today’s a Sunday and they don’t deliver on Sundays.”

I was a bit curious about Hilda. “Why were you sent to prison?”

“Murder,” she said. She looked toward my raspberry patch. “My

mother always made raspberry jam. That was the only thing you could do if you wanted things to keep, but nowadays you can freeze them.”

Irene moved her revolver commandingly. “Let’s get inside the house.”

I preceded them through the rear door into the kitchen.

“My goodness,” Hilda said. “It’s nice and clean in here. You wouldn’t expect that from a man.”

“Why not?” I said quickly. “I am by nature a neat man.”

Unfortunately, however, the germ of suspicion had been planted in Irene’s mind. “I want a tour of the whole house,” she said.

Inevitably, I was forced to open the front bedroom on the second floor. Irene’s eyes narrowed as she noticed the dressing table. She strode to the closet and opened the door, displaying, of course, the dresses and various things of that nature.

She turned. “You said you lived here alone.”

I cleared my throat. “My late wife’s room. She died a year ago. I’ve left her room exactly as it was the day she died.”

“Except that you dusted,” Hilda said.

I nodded. “Except that I dusted.” Now I recalled where I kept the shotgun shells—on the top shelf in

the pantry. "Personally," I said, "I'm rather hungry and I usually have some kind of snack at about this time."

The idea of food seemed acceptable to both of them and we descended once again to the kitchen.

I entered the pantry, letting the door appear to drift almost shut behind me as I continued talking. "Do you prefer coffee or tea?"

I used the step-stool and quickly reached up into the cardboard shell box. I stuffed four 16-gauge shells in my pocket and descended. "Sugar?"

I brought out the cups and saucers and proceeded to set up the pot of coffee. I glanced at the wall clock. Three-twenty. I would have to get rid of them by four.

I put coffee cake on the table.

"That looks nice," Hilda said. "You can see it's homemade. I guess you baked it yourself?"

For a moment I thought my only recourse would be to say yes and hope for the best, but inspiration intervened. "No," I said. "My cousin Alfred brought it when he visited this morning. His wife has quite a reputation for coffee cake." I quickly cut a few slices and changed the subject. "Were you in prison long, Hilda?"

"Twenty-six years," she said. "Ever since I was sixteen. I was sentenced to life."

I turned on the gas under the coffeepot. "I know they are generally referred to as 'life' sentences, but weren't you eligible for parole after twelve years or so?"

She finished a bite of coffee cake. "Yes, but I turned it down. I think that made a lot of trouble and it never happened before because they had to look up laws and things, and they discovered that they couldn't parole me unless I agreed, and I wouldn't."

I fastened on the incongruity. "You wouldn't accept a parole and yet when the opportunity to escape presented itself, you grasped it?"

She nodded. "Prison isn't too bad for somebody like me, except that they really ought to give you about two weeks vacation a year. To get out and see the new things, you know?" She smiled. "If I accepted the parole, the only way I could get back after seeing things would be to violate the parole by murdering somebody again or doing something else bad. And I wouldn't want to do that again unless I knew something about the person and he deserved it. But suppose I couldn't find anybody bad? I'd be stuck outside forever."

I was still pondering the logic of that when the coffee finished perking.

"Irene might be a murderess too," Hilda said.

"Might be?" I glanced at Irene. "I mean that she and her boyfriend were running away after robbing a bank and they happened to come on this cabin in the woods where two hunters were staying. So they took over, and when they left they killed both the hunters so they wouldn't be able to tell the police that they'd been there."

Just the trace of a smile appeared on Irene's lips, but she said nothing.

"And when Irene and her boyfriend were caught she said her boyfriend did the killings and he said that she was the one who did it. Nobody knew who to believe, so they were both sent to jail for life. She and her boyfriend don't even write to each other now."

I met Irene's eyes for a moment and had the distinct impression that her boyfriend had been the victim of a miscarriage of justice.

Until now, my primary interest in getting them off my property had been to prevent them from stealing my car—when it returned at four—but I could see there was probably a good deal more at stake than the fate of an automobile.

"How come you're not wearing a wedding ring?" Irene suddenly demanded.

I looked at my hand.

"I guess that's because he doesn't believe in being sentimental," Hilda

said, "about what's done is done, and she's dead."

"Don't be an idiot," Irene snapped. "If he's sentimental enough to keep her room intact, why wouldn't he wear the ring?"

I was about to say that some men do not believe in wearing wedding rings, but Hilda spoke first.

"Maybe he put it in the casket when they buried her. Sometimes bereaved people do that."

I thought I'd settle for that. "Yes," I said, "I left it in the casket."

Hilda sipped her coffee. "What are we going to do now, Irene?"

"We stay overnight," Irene said. "In the morning when the mailman shows up, we'll be waiting with sweet smiles."

Hilda agreed. "Then we lock up the mailman and this man in the basement or something and tear out the telephone wires and we'll be ten or twenty miles away before they get out and tell the police about us."

Irene smiled secretly once again. "Yeah, I guess we'll do something like that."

I now had the shells in my pocket and the shotgun waited in the closet. There remained only the marriage of the two.

I collected the cups and saucers and placed them in the sink. "Are there any objections if I go out-

doors and finish my transplanting?"

Irene shrugged. "I don't give a damn. Hilda, you stay with him, and don't let him pull any tricks."

"Don't worry," Hilda said. "I keep my mind on things, and I'll guard him real good."

"It seems to be getting a little chilly outside," I said. "I'll need a light jacket."

Hilda followed me to the front closet.

What exactly would I do next? Step into the rather large closet and let the door swing shut behind me, as I had done in the pantry? Then, while momentarily eclipsed from Hilda's view, seize the shotgun and slip in two shells?

And then what? Should I kick open the door and blast away?

I sighed. I did not think I was quite capable of anything that aggressive and cold-blooded, but at least I could go through the motions.

"The jacket is hanging on a hook in the back of the closet," I said. I opened the door and stepped inside.

As the door coasted to the closed position, I was in momentary darkness. I felt about and my hand immediately closed on the weapon. I quickly slipped two shells into the chambers and then took a deep breath.

I reopened the door. "Drop your gun, Hilda," I said firmly, but not so loud as to alert Irene in the kitchen.

Hilda frowned in concentration, and then after a very long fifteen seconds she shook her head. "No. I couldn't do that. I promised Irene."



"Hilda," I said warningly, "are you aware of what a double-barreled shotgun can do to a human being?"

She nodded. "That's how I killed my stepfather when I was sixteen. Because he kicked down the fence around my garden and he always claimed it was an acci-

dent. Only I waited and watched and saw that it wasn't an accident at all. He did it on purpose. It's very messy, but I still can't give you the gun."

I looked up at the ceiling.

"Besides," Hilda said, "if you shoot me my finger will probably twitch or something and you'll get shot too. So I think it's much better if you put your gun away. Should I count to ten?"

"Never mind," I said stiffly. I broke open the shotgun and removed the shells. I put the gun back into the closet and closed the door.

"You forgot your jacket," Hilda said.

As we passed Irene in the kitchen, she looked up from the magazine she'd found. "What were you two talking about?"

"Nothing much," Hilda said.

In the garden I picked up my trowel and went back to work. "How long do you intend to remain in the outside world this time? Two weeks?"

"No," Hilda said. "I guess I'll go back pretty soon. I didn't bring any money with me. Usually I do and I always walked off alone before, but this was a sort of spur of the moment thing. I don't think I'll do that again. I mean without planning and having the right clothes."

"How do you manage to get money in the first place?"

"I usually do sewing and crocheting for the matrons. A lot of them are grandmothers, you know, and very busy, but they still feel guilty about not crocheting or knitting or doing something useful, so they get me to crochet for them and they tell their grandchildren they did it themselves, and they always give me money."

"What happens when you go back? Do they put you in solitary?"

She smiled quietly. "Goodness no. That's just for the mean ones. The warden—he's such a nice man—talks to me and tries to make me take the parole and leave. But when I set my mind to it, I'm firm and I always say no, even when he said they wouldn't let me use any of the sewing machines. But that lasted only a week. When he saw he wasn't getting anywhere, he gave up, and I made his daughter a Communion dress."

"In other words, you could take the parole and leave prison any time you want to?"

She nodded. "I guess that's it."

An idea was beginning to form in my mind. "Do you really like it in there?"

There was a pause and then she said, "It's the only place I have. Or people. But still, sometimes I

get lonely." She sighed morosely.

"You get lonely with so many people around you?"

"They all try to be nice to me, but there's no one for me to talk to. Like a personal friend. Someone who would understand what I'm saying and never get impatient if I'm too slow. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," I said, "I do."

Irene came out of the house. "We'll be moving in fifteen minutes."

"Oh?" Hilda said.

Irene showed white teeth. "I paged through the telephone directory and it turns out that Haywood happens to have a one-man taxi service. So I phoned and he'll be out to pick us up in fifteen minutes." Her eyes narrowed. "Let's get him out of sight." Her gun indicated a direction and I moved that way.

Behind the barn, Irene said, "This is far enough."

"I'll look for some rope," Hilda said, "and we'll tie him up."

But Irene had no such ideas. Her eyes gleamed. "Don't waste your time, Hilda."

Hilda blinked. "You're going to shoot him?"

"I can't think of anything safer for us than a dead man." She leveled the gun.

I closed my eyes.

Then there was one single shot.

After a few moments I was more than just curious as to why I still remained standing. I opened my eyes again.

Irene lay at my feet and it was evident that she was quite dead.

Hilda shook her head sadly. "You know, I think she was the one who really killed those hunters." She smiled quietly. "It's one thing to kill someone who's mean, but it's another thing to kill somebody who's innocent, and so I couldn't let her shoot you." She put the gun aside and it was evident that I was no longer a prisoner or a hostage.

I took a deep breath and then went to the garage. I selected a shovel from the rack.

Hilda had followed me. "What are you doing?"

I returned to Irene's body, surveyed the slope behind the barn, and selected a spot. "I'm going to bury Irene. Nobody need ever know she's been here. When Fred's taxi shows up, you keep out of sight. I'll tell him he's got the wrong place."

Hilda frowned. "I don't understand."

"Hilda," I said gently, "there's no telling exactly how the authorities will react, but I strongly suspect they will see to it that you are *never* released from prison if ever

they learn you killed Irene. Even if it was to save my life."

She spoke patiently. "But I don't *want* to be released. Don't you remember I told you that?"

"Yes, I remember. But what I'm trying to say is that you may stay here if you want to."

She stared at me and then slowly shook her head. "No. I know you'd try to be very kind, but I could tell when you're irritated and there's nothing I could do to change because I am just what I am. It wouldn't work out."

"You still don't understand, Hilda," I said. "I mean I think you would like—"

And then I heard the car. I walked around to the front of the barn and looked up the hill road. Yes, there it was, exactly on time.

Hilda stood beside me. "Fred's taxi?"

"No."

The ten-year-old sedan slowed as it approached the driveway and the left turn blinker flashed on. It turned carefully into the long driveway and pulled to a stop before the garage.

"Your wife?" Hilda asked. "She's really alive?"

"No," I said. "I've never been married."

Ellie got out of the car and smiled. "I didn't have any accident or anything at all, Andrew, and I kept the speed limit and I met Constable Richards and he said that I was still the best driver in the whole county." Her mild, mild blue eyes rested on Hilda. "I visited with Aunt Martha until exactly three-fifteen like Andrew told me and then I said I had a very nice time and I left. We talked mostly about the weather and wasn't it a shame that the elm trees were dying?"

"Hilda," I said, "This is my sister, Ellie."

Hilda had been staring as Ellie spoke. Now she turned to me and she understood. Slowly she nodded. "If it's all right with you, Andrew, I think I'll stay and help Ellie fix supper."

I watched them walk toward the house, side by side, and then I went back to my shovel and the job I had to do.



Neither pro nor con, I merely submit that, in some quarters, prognostication and suggestion are considered bedfellows.

NEPENTHE

FOR

A
FRIEND

THE DOCTOR closed the manila folder, slid it to the left side of a remarkably bare desk and slowly removed his thick-lensed glasses. The unshielded eyes manifested gloom in moisture. "Do you want me to give it to you straight from the shoulder?" he asked.

Mr. Muggleston replied in a voice even milder than the one he normally used. "Well, yes, I suppose I do." He disliked anything straight from the shoulder, but with a man like Quillman, a staunch facer of other people's facts, a protest seemed useless.

Quillman was actually Mrs. Muggleston's doctor. She had selected him for this high service because she admired several indomitable qualities they had in common. Performing straight from the shoulder was one of

them. Calling a spade a spade was another. Things like that.

"Well, sir—"clearing the professional throat, "—here it is in a nutshell. I can give you six months. And that's an outside figure."

"Six months," said Mr. Muggleston dimly. "Of what?"

by FRANK
SISK

"Of life," declared Quillman, sliding the weighty glasses back on his extravagant nose. "Three months would be, perhaps, a closer proximation."

A chat with God, felt Mr. Muggleston, could hardly have been more portentous. "A proximation to what?" he asked, seeking a glimmer of relevance.

"It would be a more realistic prognosis," Quillman said, quite sternly. "Give a week or take a week. We prefer to leave ourselves a little margin in cases like this."

"Commendable, of course. May I ask another question?"

Quillman consulted his wrist-watch. "I have a few minutes."

"Will I suffer much pain?"

Again hoisting the glasses, Quillman settled back in his swivel chair and fixed Mr. Muggleston with a reservedly sociable smile. "Well, sir, I am glad to be able to ease your mind on that particular point. Contrary to most fatal maladies, the one from which you suffer—or rather the one with which you are afflicted—produces a growing sense of euphoria. As you approach the critical stage, you begin to feel better than you've felt in years. Your reflexes grow sharper, your appetite improves, you sleep well. The etiology behind all this is a bit too complex for the layman—adrenalin and

consequent glandular compensations—but nevertheless there is not a trace of symptomatic pain."

Mr. Muggleston nearly expressed thanks for such a beneficent ailment.

"Until the terminal period," Quillman added.

"And then?" inquired Mr. Muggleston softly.

"Well, then, sir, there is the natural concomitant of death, which is pain."

"Severe?"

"Extremely so."

"Even agonizing?"

"All pain is relative, Muggleston."

"I've heard the same adage applied to happiness," said Mr. Muggleston bleakly. "Now how long may I expect this terminal period to last?"

"A week at most. If you're lucky, it could be over in a matter of forty-eight hours."

"All luck is relative too, I guess," said Mr. Muggleston. "I wonder," he continued after a moment's pause, "if we may keep this conversation from my wife."

"I think not," said Quillman.

"I thought so."

"But you needn't be afraid, Muggleston. Your wife is a woman who can face facts, faces them better than most of us, for that matter. And since she was the one who

persuaded you to undergo this physical examination, I believe she deserves a full report. Don't you agree?"

"Apparently it's out of my hands."

"Out of your hands, yes. Also out of mine. But we have the good fortune to have at your service a pair of quite capable hands—hands, if I may say so; that will guide you with gentle firmness along this final lap of life's mysterious journey. I refer, of course, to the hands of your excellent wife."

Mr. Muggleston left Quillman's office like a man under the influence of an hallucinogenic drug. His mind felt loose. He recognized doorknobs, elevator buttons, and the revolving door that ejected his ambient body from the Downtown Medical Building, but all these objects suddenly seemed too trivial to cope with. *My excellent wife*, he kept thinking, *my excellent wife*. *My excellent wife is going to retain the reins in her quite capababababble hands until the last turning. And may God have mercy on my corpse. Amen. My excellent wife . . .*

After twenty years of marriage, give or take, to paraphrase the doctor's casual inexactitude, a segment of anointed time—a week, a month, a quarterly dividend—Ursula was still in the driver's seat

and would so continue until life did him depart. He could not even die unsupervised. Of his own volition. In his own way. Boots off and face to the wall. That's what is amounted to. He couldn't even cease unsupervised.

Outside the Downtown Medical Building the Avenue hummed with caressive softness in the October afternoon. Cars were actually crooning over the sun-dappled asphalt. Strollers, attuned to the easy rhythms, gracefully pirouetted back to the curb as the traffic light blazed red. The nearly naked trees whispered squeakily to the birds making slow arcs in the clear cloudless air. Mr. Muggleston thought he saw an orange-colored butterfly hovering delicately across the windshield of his car, but it soon proved upon closer inspection to be a traffic ticket fluttering in the breeze, pinned down by the wiper.

"Pow, pow!" snapped a voice at his elbow. "Double or nutting. Ain't it ever so true, man?"

Turning from the red-flagged parking meter, Mr. Muggleston came unpleasantly face to face with a narrow-browed youth wearing outlandish sideburns and a mossy tuft of brown hair between nether lip and sharp chin. "Good afternoon," he said vaguely.

"Like death warmed over," the

young man said. "Like I can't hardly blame you, though. From sawbones to civil equity. Pow, pow! Like I said."

Still feeling out of focus, Mr. Muggleston said, "Do we know each other?"

"Not yet, man. Not under the skin. But a pal of mine's got a pad across the street, that big graystone edifice like, and we make like a hobby of nockling in with high power on what comes and goes in D.M.B."

"D.M.B.?"

"The place you just split from, Chad."

"Oh, I see."

"So do we. All kinds. Gravid chicks. Pot wallopers with mitts tipped. G-U series slob. Varicose suppose. And like that. Then some of your types, Chad."

"My types?"

"End of the road. C'est si finale. Right?"

"I don't follow you, son."

"If you did, dad, I'd pipe the fuzz. A joke. But it don't fit the scene right now. Am I right? Bluesville more like it. The nocks never lie."

"The nocks?"

The youth patted a binocular case that hung suspended at his side by a shoulder strap. "The double oughts, Chad. The super gloms. Me and my pal can see

endsville in a face three blocks off, and D.M.B. is batting a high average. But in your case, Chad, I zeroed in with the bald eye. Right off I know what gives is gonna give with no letup. Right? So whatever it is, swine fever or birch blight or jig plague, the bald eye tells me you need a lift like, a real-to-goodness blastoff."

"I think I need a drink," said Mr. Muggleston dazedly.

"I'm a snowman myself," said the youth, "but I accept the invitation."

Mr. Muggleston fumbled the car keys from his topcoat pocket.

The youth raised a somewhat dirty hand in admonition. "No wheels required. There's a cozy cave just around the corner where it's always happy hour."

"What's your name, son?" asked Mr. Muggleston in the hope of getting something on balance.

"Call me Big John," the youth said.

Hardly diverted, Mr. Muggleston said, "My name is Ted."

"Don't brood about it, Chad," said Big John.

Traveling by taxi, Mr. Muggleston arrived home that evening a little after eight, or two hours later than usual. He felt better than he had felt in years and, as Quillman had predicted, in fine appetite. He told this to the driver, who insist-



ed on helping him from the cab. "I could eat a bear," he said. "Bones and all." Then he hiccupped.

"Take some bitters and soda

first," the driver suggested wryly.

"And yet I'm a dying man," Mr. Muggleston said happily.

"Wait'll tomorra," the driver said.

"And yet I feel fine. Never better. Free. Freeze the birds."

"Wait'll tomorra," the driver repeated on the way to the front door. "Six bucks all told."

"More or less," said Mr. Muggleston, thrusting a hand toward a trousers pocket and not quite making it. "Give a buck or take a buck."

"Six to the penny, mate," the driver said. "Should I ring the doorbell?"

"By all means," said Mr. Muggleston emphatically, then with even greater emphasis, "No!" With the sudden realization of where he was he made a strong effort at self-composure. "No, I'll carry on from here alone. But thanks. Many thanks." From some one of his many elusive pockets he extracted a fistful of crumpled bills and gave one of them—it looked like a ten—to the driver. "That do it?"

"That does it, mate. Bitters and soda, now don't forget."

Alone, Mr. Muggleston laboriously and repetitiously searched himself for keys. He could hear them jingle but he couldn't seem to capture them. To preserve his equilibrium while the frisking proceeded, he leaned against the door jamb and rang the bell. With gradual surprise he heard the chimes tinkling distantly.

The most recent maid, a pallid

sliver of a thing named Cora or Corinne, opened the door, then darted off down the hallway. Maids did not remain. They came and went. They darted and disappeared. None measured up for long to Ursula's lofty standards. Either that, or Ursula refused to taper down to theirs. Hence, many comings and goings of strange and fearful faces, always cut from the same frail pattern, and usually bearing names so similar as to be almost indistinguishable: Cora, Corinne, Carrie, Connie, Kitty, Kate . . .

Mr. Muggleston found his wife (without actually looking for her) sitting regally at her Queen Anne desk in the livingroom. She appeared to be writing checks for the household bills. The regality was derived from whalebone corsets, of course, but there was something admirable about a woman who, dressed for dinner and kept waiting, could while away an anxious hour, stiff of spine, over a checkbook. You had to hand it to her.

As Mr. Muggleston was handing it to her teeteringly in the doorway, Mrs. Muggleston figuratively dotted the last *i* and crossed the last *t* before turning to acknowledge his presence. Her moon-shaped face was unexpectedly benign.



"Good evening, my dear," said Mr. Muggleston. "Unavoidably detained. Sorry."

"A slight exaggeration," said his excellent wife, "but I can understand, Theodore."

"Do we have in house any sodas

and bitter? Or would you know?"

"Doctor Quillman phoned a few hours ago and acquainted me with the facts of your case. They came as a distinct shock."

"Oh, yes. Very distinct shock."

"It has taken me some little time to arrange things in perspective. Please remove your hat, Theodore, and sit down."

"Quillman called? Doesn't waste time."

"Doctor Quillman does not feel we have too much time to waste. Please remove that hat."

Mr. Muggleston took the hat off and placed it on a table beside a cutglass vase of red dahlias. He regarded it owlishly, then addressed it. "All time is relative, Ursula. Quillman's theory of relativity. Quote unquote. Here today, gone tomorrow. Or vice versa."

Mrs. Muggleston raised her thick body from the Queen Anne chair in a queenly manner. "Is it possible, Theodore, that you are intoxicated beyond the point for a serious little talk?"

"Possible."

"Most unfortunate. We must face this situation eventually, you know. And the sooner the better."

"The sooner the worse," replied Mr. Muggleston as he began to amble flexuously toward the sideboard where the liquor was kept. "That's the way I see it, my dear."

Mrs. Muggleston followed his progress with a gaze of quiet disapproval. "You don't see anything too clearly at the moment, I'm afraid."

"Oh, yes. To the contrary. I see things." He poured himself a tot of something from a decanter. "All kinds things, Ursula. Inside out. Super gloms."

"I wish you would please sit down, Theodore, before you fall down."

Obediently he sidled to a nearby chair and collapsed in it. He tasted the half-spilled drink. It seemed to be sweetish—a dessert wine.

Mr. Muggleston had lately developed the secret habit of looking at women and trying to imagine them as men. He concentrated only on the head. It was simply a matter of mentally barbering a coiffure into a crewcut or other masculine hair style, and then erasing such other bits of feminine camouflage as eye shadow, rouge, lipstick, earrings and necklaces. The results were always amusing, sometimes surprising. His secretary, for instance, was vigorously handsome with a bald head—more of a male actually than some of the young men around the office. Certain alleged beauties, particularly those whose predominating adornment was a high-piled rick of hair, often became downright

insipid when imaginatively shorn. He now used his percipient clip-pers on Ursula as he downed the wine. He left her only a gingerish tonsure. The process transformed her into a stocky, thicknecked, sharpeyed something or other. A football coach. That was it. She looked a little like Knute Rockne.

"Never say die," Mr. Muggleston muttered. "Give it best you got. Go in and win."

"I don't understand a word you say," said Mrs. Muggleston, her voice a notch too high for Rockne's.

"Luck a the Irish," said Mr. Muggleston.

"I think it best to adjourn to the dining room. Come along, Theodore." Wheeling like an old full-back, Mrs. Muggleston carried the somewhat soggy conversational ball from the room.

Upon awakening the next morning, Mr. Muggleston grew keenly aware that he possessed not a single symptom of his fatal affliction: not a vestige of euphoria, not a hint of appetite, no reflexes worth trusting as far as the bathroom, and not the slightest desire to stay awake. If the astute Dr. Quillman could have examined him at that moment, the prognosis might have been for a long and miserable life. Mr. Muggleston himself, after testing prickly feet on the icy floor,

feared another hour of existence might be unendurable.

He sat slumped for a miserable minute on the edge of the bed. Then, hearing Ursula moving massively in her adjoining room, he willed himself to the shower. Five minutes later, performing shakily with a safety razor, he began to face the recollection of the previous afternoon and evening. The memory of Big John came to him first and, though very strange, seemed a lot more real than the session with Quillman. Foretelling death is always an act of fantasy in the eyes of the one whose life is concerned. Big John merely offered an easement against fear and pain through the use of—heroin?

"Heroin," said Mr. Muggleston in a low incredulous voice. He hastily toweled the fringes of shaving cream from his face, then went to the bedroom closet and began a search of the many pockets which had been about his person the day before—topcoat, suitcoat, trousers. He found the packet in his wallet—a square inch of waxed paper sealed with cellophane tape—twenty dollars' worth. Absurd.

"You'll need a needle, Chad," Big John had said. "A needle does good like a real fix should."

"A needle?" Insane.

"A hypo like."

"Are they available in pharma-

cies?" Crazier and crazier. Loony!

"You're aces as a joker, Chad. But keep tethered a few moons. I'll look around like."

"Meanwhile?" Drunk and nutty.

"You could sniff it like snow, but I don't advise. You gotta be a Charlie Coke for that, a real happy duster. A big bloke of a snowman like me, Chad."

Mr. Muggleston returned to the bathroom with the intention of flushing the packet down the drain, but on second thought he concealed it in a box of adhesive bandages.

Now, he prepared to face Ursula. He tried to review the events following last night's homecoming but could recall them only vaguely. All he was fairly sure of was that he had been quite out of character, even rambunctious, perhaps defiant. The very haziness of remembrance frightened him because of the dreadful pitfalls it might hide. He felt like a child who has for the first time closed his eyes and, with bated breath, blindly challenged the infallibility of his mother.

Good Lord, he thought on the way downstairs, is this what our relationship has become? Childless woman with callow man? Is this what one lives for? Is this why one fears death—an absolute vacuum stuffed finally with the positive hollowness of life?

Mrs. Muggleston, wearing a commodious negligee and a full head of hair, greeted her husband from the breakfast table with a maternal smile. Because he rather expected a maternal frown, Mr. Muggleston was momentarily disconcerted. He poured himself a cup of coffee, then thoughtfully refilled his wife's half-empty cup.

"Thank you, Theodore."

"You're welcome, dear."

"Sausages and scrambled eggs?"

"No, thanks. Not this morning. And, Ursula—please accept my apologies for last night."

"You weren't yourself last night, Theodore. I've taken that into account. Orange juice?"

"Yes."

"Doctor Quillman's findings were a great shock, naturally. For both of us."

Sipping juice, Mr. Muggleston was unable to visualize his wife, who was often shocked by the frivolous, being affected by the momentous. She was built to withstand the hurricane, only to fall over a rollerskate.

"But that's what a medical check-up is for," she continued, spearing two more sausages. "To tell us where we stand."

"There's something to that saying, ignorance is bliss, my dear."

"Bliss is another of those dream words, Theodore."

If Big John were to be believed, bliss could be had for a double sawbuck in a package of waxed paper. Bliss was just twenty feet up and forty feet over, among the bandages. "What I mean to say, Ursula, is that the future should be unexpected."

"Nonsense. Physical checkups help one take inventory of the future. Only with a knowledge of what may be ahead can one conduct the affairs of the present with some degree of significance. That's why I insisted upon your accompanying me, and most fortuitously."

"It's knowledge I could well do without."

"A month from now, two months at most, you would have known anyway, Theodore. This way we have more time to make plans."

"Plans for what?"

"For the future, of course."

"Somehow I don't feel properly involved in it." Mr. Muggleston selected a slice of toast and assayed it. "Strange. Now that I don't really have a future, everyone has a plan for it. It started yesterday with Big John."

"Who on earth is Big John?"

"A young man who sells something like sleep to the deeply troubled. A street-corner psychologist, a reader of doomed faces. Also, to

use his own apt phrase, a blower of snow."

"We haven't time to discuss trifles," said Mrs. Muggleston. "The essentials demand our immediate attention. Shall we proceed?"

Mr. Muggleston bit tentatively into the toast.

"Good," said Mrs. Muggleston, as if something had been settled. "First, I want you to phone Bill Benjamin at the office and have him pick up your car at the police garage."

"Is that where it is?"

"That's where it is. They towed it off the street last night. Bill can then come round here and drive you to work."

"Am I supposed to go to work today?"

"I think it the best approach. For the present, we don't wish to disturb the status quo, Theodore. And tomorrow afternoon I believe we should have a closed meeting with Ambrose Carmody on certain codicils to your will."

"Yes, Ursula."

"I'm especially concerned about that trust fund for your college. It must be adapted to this new situation or it won't be the mature memorial we originally planned. Twenty years after your death would be a more sensible provision now. Or upon my own demise as trustee. Don't you agree?"

"Do you think you'll survive me by approximately twenty years, my dear?"

Applying a coat of marmalade to toast, Mrs. Muggleston arched an eyebrow. "The term of life left to any of us is both highly speculative and extremely relative. None of us knows what's around the corner and . . ."

"I do."

". . . and therefore we must conduct our pursuits with the sparse information at hand. Two weeks from today I suggest we get away for a good vacation. Bermuda, I think."

"I'd prefer Las Vegas."

"Relaxation is on the agenda, Theodore, not excitement."

So they sailed to Bermuda at the appointed time and spent three dreary weeks (in Mr. Muggleston's estimation) at the club-hotel which once was the scene, as regular guests frequently informed them, of a summit meeting between President Eisenhower, Prime Minister Churchill and Premier Laniel.

"Who is Premier Laniel?" asked Mr. Muggleston upon hearing this memoration for the sixth time. After that he was generally let alone with the painful thoughts which were gradually consuming all his inner self.

It was the endless presence of the sea, always a brilliant turquoise,

that kept his thoughts tied to the dark aspects of mortality. Even at night, as Ursula snored through a second cycle of sleep, the sea sound's rhythms rolled mercilessly over him. He felt himself diminishing against eternal backgrounds until finally he was almost resigned to the insignificance of his own death.

Yes, he could almost accept it, but he dreaded the prophesied pain that would usher it in. He had always been cowardly in the face of anything that might hurt him—a dentist's drill, static electricity, boiling water, a slap in the face.

Suddenly he decided he must go home. He must put himself within reach of the packaged nepenthe on his bathroom shelf. He must present himself to Big John's searching nocks and negotiate for a needle. A needle. He winced. Even that prick of pain seemed a high price to pay for the resultant tranquillity. Was there, instead, snow on the agenda? Perhaps.

Without preamble he announced to Ursula over their next breakfast that he had booked seats on a flight scheduled for takeoff at lunchtime. He expected strong opposition and was frankly surprised when Ursula confined herself to the comment that they had engaged their room for a full month.

"I've handled that with the management," Mr. Muggleston said.

"Well, all right, Ted," said Mrs. Muggleston. It was the first time she had used the short form of his name in years.

Later, aloft with a complimentary highball nearly finished, Mr. Muggleston tested his new decisiveness against Ursula, who seemed on the verge of slumber.

"I've done a lot of thinking these last few days," he said.

She yawned.

"And I've concluded that I won't return to the office," he continued.

"I don't see that you should," she said sleepily.

Rather amazed, he said, "Good. Now another thing, Ursula, this condition of mine is supposed to generate a lot of pain at the terminal stage. Or so says Quillman."

"He's always right," she said placidly.

"I can't stand pain, you know. Never could."

"One must face—"

"Stop right there. I'm facing the fact and the fact is simply *that I can't stand pain*. So I plan to take radical steps to alleviate it as much as possible. And if these steps aren't enough, well then I plan to shoot myself."

Mrs. Muggleston was drifting into a doze.

Mr. Muggleston finished his

highball and signaled the stewardess for another. "Did you hear what I said, Ursula?" he asked a moment later.

"What? What was that, Ted? The hum of the engines is putting me asleep."

"I said I plan to shoot myself."

"Don't be silly, Ted. You don't even own a gun."

"I plan to procure one."

"Well, if you insist," she said in dozing tones.

By the time the stewardess arrived with the second highball, Mrs. Muggleston was sound asleep.

A few days later, during a leisurely lunch, Mr. Muggleston introduced a subject which in the past invariably had made for a marked difference of opinion. "Cremation," he said, dangling the word-like bait.

Mrs. Muggleston, assiduously occupied with a slice of lemon and an avocado salad, failed to rise.

"With all due respect for your views on the subject, Ursula, cremation of my remains is my earnest wish."

Mrs. Muggleston remained abstractedly mute, perhaps because Cora or Corinne darted to the table at that moment with a tray of hot pecan rolls.

When they were alone again, Mr. Muggleston resumed his quest for a reaction. "I've already reduced

this request to writing. In the form of a letter to you, my dear, to be opened after my death. I thought in this way it would relieve you of any stigma that might attach itself to your conscience."

"Very thoughtful of you, Ted. Very. Don't these rolls look delicious?"

"The letter also spells out in some detail how my ashes may be disposed of. They're to be scattered from a plane at an altitude of two thousand feet over the—"

A phone rang in the distance.

"—the Block Island section of Long Island Sound. The wind should be due east at the time. An evergreen wreath should follow the ashes. And there should be the foretaste of snow in the—"

Cora or Corinne flitted through the doorway. "You're wanted on the phone, ma'am."

"Thank you." Mrs. Muggleston arose with a sigh of reluctance. In a minute she was back, saying, "That was Doctor Quillman. He's set you down for a two-o'clock appointment."

"Today?"

"Today, yes."

"Arbitrary gent, isn't he? What's he discovered, a new miracle drug?"

"He was rather vague. Clinical review. That's all he said."

"I think I'll call him back and

tell him to go to hell. Good idea!"

"Please, Ted, let's not. Clinical reviews are an enormous aid to science."

Mr. Muggleston finally got into his car and drove to the Downtown Medical Building, but he did it as much to see Big John as to participate in Quillman's enigmatic proceedings. On the way he stopped at a florist's shop and bought a white carnation. What was it that Big John had said? *If you ever want a needle or a fix, Dad, flash a white posy in your buttonhole on the steps of the D.M.B.*

He presented himself punctually to the receptionist in Quillman's office and she, without further ado, opened the door to the inner sanctum and closed it behind him. Sitting soberly behind his barren desk, the doctor peered without a word for a moment from behind his formidable glasses, then got to his feet and extended a long-fingered hand covered with curly black hair. Measured amenities were allotted fifteen seconds, followed by a display of manila folders.

"We are confronted by a contretemps," said Quillman, tapping his nose with a pencil.

"Something about a clinical review, isn't it?"

"Clerical would be a better word

under the circumstances." The doctor removed the hefty glasses from his nose and placed them, together with the pencil, between the two manila folders on the desk. "To get right to the point, sir, I have been looking at Mrs. Muggleston's duodenum."

"You don't say?"

"And also her jejunum."

"That's interesting."

"Duodenum and jejunum, among other things." Quillman intoned the words as if he had the makings of a popular song. "Seen side by side they tell us quite a story. How is Mrs. Muggleston, by the way?"

"Quite well, thank you, but—"

"Eating well?"

"Yes, I'd say so. Maybe a little too well."

"And sleep? How about that?"

"She's always been a sound sleeper, but lately—"

"And her disposition is perhaps more conciliatory?"

"Yes, that's exactly right."

Quillman nodded in satisfaction. "It reconciles, yes."

"*What* reconciles? And with *what*? I mean what are you driving at?"

Quillman took refuge behind an X-ray picture. "Until yesterday I was unable to reconcile the clinical report with this." He struck the picture smartly with hirsute fore-

finger. "Now I have it. You and your excellent wife underwent checkups on the same day, did you not?"

"We did."

"Well, there's the answer. A pity, a real pity." He slid the film into a folder. "A clerical error, a mere instance of typographical transposition of names. To err, as has been said, is human. To correct one's errors is godlike. A pity, though."

Mr. Muggleston gaped incredulously at the devious man behind the desk. "Are you trying to say,—"

"Oh, the diagnosis was correct in every detail," added Quillman blithely. "It was the patients who got mixed up, as it were."

"Well, I'll be a son of a gun."

"A pity."

Placing his left hand on the desk as a pivot, Mr. Muggleston leaned forward and struck the doctor flush on the snout. The force of the blow sent the swivel chair whirling merrily.

Once outside, though, a wonderful sense of airiness possessed him. Despite the leaden skies, cold with hidden snow, the day seemed the

most beautiful he had ever seen. He stood there inhaling the damp air with lungs as greedy as a man's just rescued from drowning. He was so taken with the novelty of himself that he didn't immediately see the little figure of Big John materialize unkemptly at his side.

"Greetings, Dad. So you finally make the scene again."

"Why, hello, boy. Glad to see you."

"You got some cool today, man. What happened?"

"I'm a new man, son. It's a long story."

"You mean you ain't gonna cash in like?"

"That's what I mean."

"And after I went way out to snatch you a needle, Dad."

"Don't worry, Big John. I'll buy the needle. And a couple of fixes too. But not for myself. For a friend."

"A friend in need, hey, Dad?"

"Amen to that, Big John. Amen to that."

"Let's break for the cave, Dad."

"Call me Chad. Okay?"

"Okay, Chad."



Conversely, there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for those who have failed to live down the past.



Tara had the happiest childhood of anyone I've ever known. The big white Sutter house on Maple Street seemed to spill over with happiness. With its smooth front lawn and enormous back yard, it was a mecca for the neighborhood children. In the spring the gleaming white house seemed enveloped in a drifting cloud of apple blossoms. In autumn, surrounded by scarlet oaks and yellow maples, it remained a shining white attraction.

Tara loved the place, loved every individual tree and bush—you

might almost say every blade of grass. The word is much abused, but I think you could call her childhood idyllic. Her worst experience was a broken arm, but right after she broke it, Aunt Millie came down from Boston and stayed a whole month. With Aunt Millie around, who could fret about a broken arm? Not Tara certainly; Aunt Millie made every-

by
**JOSEPH
PAYNE
BRENNAN**

thing fun. You laughed all day and went to bed laughing.

The golden years went on and it seemed they would go on forever. Tara left for college but the big white house on Maple Street was still the center of her universe. She'd been out of college about a year and was working in nearby Weston Ridge when real tragedy struck.

It was found that her father had cancer. It progressed slowly but relentlessly, and while the doctors fought it with every weapon they possessed, the Sutter money ebbed away. By the time Joel Sutter died, the big white house on Maple Street was heavily mortgaged. After other debts were added up, there was no alternative but to sell.

Tara had borne up well during her father's slow and agonizing decline, but the loss of her childhood home left her heartbroken. When the remaining Sutters moved to a small house on Elwood Street, she actually became ill.

She got better, of course, and life went on, but the white house on Maple Street, with its attendant memories, was enshrined in her heart and mind.

Less than two years after the move to Elwood Street, the new owner of the Maple Street house died, leaving his estate to a large, quarrelsome and rather greedy

family. Over the years, as Tara's father had slowly declined, the big white house had been badly neglected. Now the new heirs decided the land was worth more than the house, and it would be foolish, they agreed, to spend several thousand dollars on repairs. They therefore had the house torn down and prepared to sell the land.

The news was a shock to Tara, but this time she didn't get sick. Instead she developed "the obsession." It was the only abnormal thing about an otherwise lovable and eminently sensible young lady.

Tara decided that so far as she herself was concerned, the big white house had never been demolished. After the wreckers moved in, she carefully avoided Maple Street. If she happened to be riding home with friends who inadvertently drove down Maple Street, she would turn her head away or even shut her eyes until they were well past the site where the beloved house had once stood. On no occasion did she so much as glimpse the gaping cellar hole. Tight-lipped, she refused to discuss the matter. The house was still there, she insisted, and she wouldn't talk about it.

The family who had razed the house planned to sell the property as a supermarket site, but before the sale went through, they began

to quarrel among themselves about the price. The quarrel turned into a bitter family feud. No one would budge. The land remained unsold and weeds began growing in the old cellar hole.

This new development made no apparent difference to Tara. Whether an empty cellar hole or a supermarket actually occupied the old site, in her own mind the house was still there.

It was about this time that the Sutters—Tara had two sisters and a grown brother, besides her mother—decided to hold a small house party. As a family friend of long standing, I was invited.

Other guests included Aunt Millie, ancient but still irrepressible, Melissa Mowerly, for whom I had a secret "crush," Eric Sanderson, who grew up next door to the Sutters, Jim Clote, Dora Frazier, Frank Yarmon, Pearl Johnson, Ursula Wood and Mr. Bodmore, who had known Aunt Millie for a good many years.

Of course I accepted. I never missed a chance to see Melissa and, like everyone else, I adored Tara.

A few days before the scheduled party, Tara came down with a cold. It got steadily worse and she went to bed with a high fever. Naturally Mrs. Sutter wanted to call off the party, but Tara wouldn't hear of it.

"They've all made plans!" she told her mother. "At least they can stand in the doorway and talk to me. I'll feel a lot worse if they *don't* come!"

Mrs. Sutter sighed and knew she was defeated. Understanding Tara as well as she did, she realized that Tara probably *would* get worse if the party were cancelled. She'd fret and brood and wouldn't be able to sleep. So the party stayed on schedule.

Shortly after we were all assembled at the Sutter house, everyone trooped upstairs to greet Tara. She was sitting up in bed, perfectly ravishing in a beribboned apricot-colored nightgown and bed jacket. Her face was quite flushed but I couldn't decide whether her high color was caused by fever or by laughing at Aunt Millie's uproarious remarks.

We crowded in the doorway and assured her that she was just antisocial at heart and wanted Aunt Millie all to herself. She replied gaily, and the banter might have gone on for an hour had not Mrs. Sutter tactfully but firmly intervened.

We went downstairs in high good humor. Every half hour or so Aunt Millie went up to see Tara—against Mrs. Sutter's orders—and shortly afterward we would hear Tara's infectious laughter ring out.

We ate and drank and danced and talked till well after midnight. Mrs. Sutter told us that Tara had finally fallen asleep and that her cough seemed to be better.

The Sutter house was not large and sleeping arrangements were a trifle complicated. I was assigned a cot in a tiny room adjacent to the rear pantry, but it was comfortable enough. Most of the male guests were on the first floor or in the basement; the women found beds upstairs or in the small finished loft.

I had been in bed about an hour and was just falling asleep when some kind of commotion made me sit up. I heard Mrs. Sutter's voice, shrill and agitated, and then a great slamming of doors. I dressed quickly, not knowing what to expect.

I was putting on my jacket when Melissa Mowerly plunged through the door. She was breathless. "Kirk!" she gasped, "you've got to help us! Tara is gone!"

"Gone!" I echoed incredulously.

She nodded. "Mrs. Sutter thinks she woke up with a fever and went outside. But we can't find her. She may have fallen somewhere!"

I grabbed her arm. "Let's go!"

Mrs. Sutter and someone with a flashlight were already outside near the front porch. Melissa and I moved toward the back, calling,

"Tara! Tara! Tara!" loudly, wildly.

As we skirted the shrubbery more lights went on inside the house.

We peered into the half darkness and I glanced up at the cold October moon. "Did Tara have anything on besides a nightgown?"

Melissa shrugged. "The closet door was open. Mrs. Sutter thinks she may have taken a coat or a jacket or something, but we didn't take the time to check through all her clothes."

I suddenly had a hunch. "Come on!" I said. Holding Melissa's hand, I started to run through the big back yard toward the rear gate which led into Summer Street.

As the gate clashed shut behind us and we started down the street, Melissa suddenly stopped. "Kirk, I don't think she would get far. Where are we going?"

"Maple Street," I answered. "Hurry!"

Maple Street was only about seven blocks from Summer and we reached it in record time, considering the circumstances. Panting, we finally paused as we turned into the street.

A pattern of moonlight and shadow, blurred somehow by a sheen of accumulating frost, did tricks with one's vision. At first I saw only an empty street criss-crossed by tree shadows. Then, far

down on one side, I glimpsed a small hurrying figure.

"There she is!" I told Melissa, and we both started to run again.

We were about halfway down Maple Street when the figure before us turned in off the sidewalk. I realized at once that she had reached the approximate site of the old Sutter house, the big white house of her happy, vanished childhood.

I sprinted forward. I didn't want her to fall into that old cellar hole, didn't want her to—

Within a few yards of the spot where she had turned in, I suddenly stopped in absolute amazement, paralyzed and speechless.

It was Tara all right, wearing slippers and some kind of short jacket over her nightgown, and she was going up the flagged path from the sidewalk—but she wasn't going up toward a gaping, empty cellar hole.

Striding swiftly, she was approaching a big white house, a big white house aglow with lights, standing sharp and clear in the frosty moonlight.

As I watched, frozen with disbelief and a terror which made my heart pound, she reached the porch. She was about to start up the porch steps when I finally found my voice.

"Tara!"

She stopped, reluctantly it seemed, and very slowly turned around.

I can't recall precisely what emotion possessed me at that moment. It was primarily, I guess, fear—fear of the unknown, fear for Tara, a conviction for which I actually had no real grounds that Tara must at all costs be called back from that visible and yet impossible house which loomed before me in the moonlight. "Tara! Don't move! Don't move! Wait for me!" I rushed up the path.

I caught her just as she swayed and pitched forward. Momentarily my attention was diverted from everything else. After I had got a firm grip on her and saw that she had apparently fainted, I glanced up.

I was standing on the edge of a black and empty cellar hole. There was no house, no sign of any house.

I looked around wildly. Melissa, ashen-faced, was still standing on the sidewalk.

"You saw it too?" I asked in a hoarse voice. "You saw the white house?"

She nodded mutely, unable to speak.

For days Tara hung between life and death. She had not merely fainted when I caught her, but had lapsed into a comatose state brought on by raging fever. Very

slowly she fought her way back to consciousness and life, but many months passed before she recovered fully.

Melissa and I never mentioned the big white house which both of us had seen where actually only an empty cellar hole existed.

Months later, when we were alone together, the subject came up. I knew Melissa had been brooding about it, and now she questioned me.

"Well, you see," I said, "it's simply that Tara had the image of that house so firmly stamped in her own mind, especially that night when she was feverish and probably groping subconsciously toward the past, that she was able, all unknowing of course, to transmit to our own minds an actual visual reproduction of the house."

Melissa frowned. "In other words, all we saw was a picture sort of projected from Tara's own mind, like telepathy." Melissa was not entirely satisfied with my explanation, but she accepted it.

Of course we both wondered whether Tara remembered any part of that impossible night. Naturally, we didn't question her about it. We did notice, however, that she appeared to have lost her "obsession." She no longer closed her eyes or looked away when she was riding down Maple Street. She'd

look right at the old cellar hole where the Sutter house had stood.

Then one day she spoke out.

"Remember the night of the party?" she began. "Well, I had the strangest experience. I suppose you'll insist it was just a fever dream, but it was very real to me. Anyway, it seemed I got up out of bed, put on a jacket and walked alone through the night back to Maple Street. And do you know—*there was our old house!* It was exactly as I've always remembered it. All the lights were on and I was just about to start up the porch steps . . ."

She hesitated and put a hand to her head. "Well, I forget what happened *then*. But I'm convinced that our old house really does still exist!"

Mrs. Sutter smiled gently. "But Tara, dear, we passed the cellar hole on Maple Street only yesterday. You saw it."

Tara nodded and frowned. "I know that. I guess what I mean is that the *past* exists—somewhere. The house doesn't actually exist today, but it still exists in yesterday's time. And yesterday's time is forever!"

My eyes met Melissa's. Both of us were remembering a big white house, lights blazing, standing sharp and clear in the frosty moonlight.

Should "the laws of probability and chance" intimate immunity to failure, I hasten to mention that vaccinations are not infallible.



I was staring morosely at my car's flat rear tire when the good-looking blonde pulled into the adjacent parking slot. She gave me a brief sympathetic glance, but didn't speak as she swung sleek legs free and started for the apartment building. I called, "Oh, miss . . ."

She stopped, turned. "Yes?"

I made a vague gesture. "I hate to impose," I said, "but perhaps you can help me."

She walked back. "Oh?"

"It appears my jack's broken," I explained. I indicated the trunk of her convertible. "If I could borrow yours . . ."

Her uncertainty apparently al-

layed by my thick bifocals and graying temples, she hesitated only briefly, then extended her key case. "Of course."

The trunk's miscellany was scant: spare wheel in its well, a grease-spattered road map, a couple of tire irons and lug wrench, but no jack.

As I relocked the trunk the girl said, "I'm sorry; I was sure there was one."

"Please don't concern yourself," I assured her. "It's no calamity; just an inconvenience to be hung up at this late hour." Then I added, "I'm Professor Deacon, from the University. I've been visiting a

sick colleague here. Do you have an apartment in the building, Miss—uh—

"Wilson. Cora Wilson. Yes, I do."

"My friend was settling down for the night when I left and I'd hate to rouse him," I ventured. "If I might impose a bit more, use your phone to call an all-night garage?"

Patiently, Cora Wilson had anticipated my request; she nodded, gave me a small smile. "Certainly, Professor."

"You're very kind," I said, collecting my briefcase. "I'll just bring this along for safety. It's a personal project on which I've been working."

The girl's apartment was neat, comfortably furnished without a lavish decor. She brought me the phone directory and I thumbed the yellow pages.

"This should do it," I said after a moment. "Mattlock's Garage: twenty-four hour service."

I dialed, identified myself, recounted my predicament and cited my car's specific location.

"They're sending a man," I told Cora Wilson as I finished. "He'll come up here as soon as he's through; I explained my own trunk's unlocked." I passed back the directory. "You've been most kind," I repeated.

"I'm glad I could be of some

help," she said. "Would you like a drink while you're waiting?"

She had taken a chair opposite me; her legs were indeed sleek. Averting my gaze, I said, "No, thank you. I'm afraid I'm not very strong on liquor."

Cora Wilson had caught my shift of vision. Her lips twitched as she said pointedly, "I imagine you're not too strong with women, either, Professor."

I manufactured a wry grin. "I suppose not," I admitted.

She became contrite at my abashment. "I shouldn't have said that. It's just that these days a girl doesn't run across a decent man too often."

"Decent?"

"Well—not on the make or take. They're all out to score everywhere they can. A girl's got to play it that way too."

"I don't quite understand," I said.

"You wouldn't," she told me. "That's my point."

I studied her. "What do you do, Miss Wilson?"

"I'm a vocalist at the Hi Hat Club. Are you sure you wouldn't care for a drink?"

I laughed shortly. "You're a persistent young woman. All right, a small Scotch if you have it."

"One small Scotch coming up, Professor," she said.

The next half hour passed agreeably enough with innocuous small talk. After another ten minutes, the apartment buzzer sounded. I arose, followed the girl as she answered. A redheaded character with sharp features, sharper eyes, and wearing dirty gray coveralls, stood in the hall.

"Professor Deacon?"

I moved forward. "Yes."

He handed me a work slip. "All set, Professor. Sorry I couldn't make it sooner."

I paid him and pocketed the slip. "Considering the circumstances, you were quite prompt," I said. "I appreciate—" I stopped; the redhead was eyeing me closely. I said, "You seem puzzled."

He nodded. "I didn't place the name at first, but aren't you the math professor from the University, on leave or something?"

I said shortly, "That's correct but—"

"I remember reading about you in the papers. Something personal, something about developing a project on the laws of probability and chance. Gambling odds. Real scientific stuff."

"Thank you," I said, even more curt, "but as you say, that's a personal matter and I wouldn't want to keep you—"

He grinned. "Sure; I understand. No offense, Professor. I just

wanted you to know I recognized you."

From me, his shrewd gaze had flicked to Cora Wilson; he drew in his breath softly, then said, "You got a few minutes more, Professor?"

I scowled. "Look—"

He sidled into the apartment, closed the door. "You should read the papers more yourself," he told me.

Cora Wilson's frown matched mine. "Get out of here," she suddenly ordered the redhead.

He grinned. "Relax, both of you. This could be the big chance for all of us."

Cora Wilson's gaze was bleak. I said coldly, "Whatever you're intimating, I'm not interested. I've already taken up too much of this young lady's time and you heard her—"

He disregarded my tone and the girl's hostility. "Just so we'll all be acquainted, the name's Jarvis, Larry Jarvis," he said. "And speaking of names, like I suggested, you don't keep up to date, Professor."

Cora Wilson's tight breathing was audible; I glanced at her, back to Jarvis. "Get to the point," I barked.

"Sure thing." He settled on the divan, eyed us placidly. "Six days ago, a gunman by the name of Leo Lassiter was shot and killed trying to go over the wall at State



Prison. Lassiter had been in only four months, was doing seven years for armed robbery. He'd heisted fifty thousand dollars from a savings and loan company."

Jarvis paused, watching Cora Wilson. "The cops collared Lassiter two days after the heist—but not the money. They never did come up with the money." His gaze re-

verted to me. "That's what I meant by keeping up with the news, Professor. The papers rehashed the whole bit following Lassiter's death. Seems that back at the time of the heist, his steady girlfriend was a chick named Cora Wilson."

"No! It's not true!" Cora Wilson's denial was vehement; she faced Jarvis with flushed features.

He remained calm. "Come off it. It's a matter of record."

"About the money, I mean!" she rejoined. "I *was* seeing Leo then, yes, but he didn't pass that money on to me when the police were closing in on him. I didn't know anything about it then and I still don't. I convinced the police—"

Jarvis chuckled, held up a palm. "Relax," he told her. "Don't try for an Academy Award. Remember what I said: this could be our big chance."

I said icily, "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. Furthermore—"

Jarvis interrupted. "The girl does. Doesn't she, Blondie?"

Cora Wilson snapped, "No, I don't!"

The redhead sighed. "So I'll spell it out. The professor's working on a comprehensive study of gambling. He probably doesn't call it that; averages and probabilities and chance factors sound more impressive for the eggheads. But it's still a gambling gimmick, and with his knowledge and background it should be basically sound. More than that, he's been working on it for months, should be just about finished."

I said, "Dammit, man—"

He ignored me, directly addressed the girl. "Las Vegas is crawling with system players. You

see them at all the tables. They're riding hunches, essentially. But we'd have something solid, scientific. With enough money—"

"There isn't any money!"

"—enough to keep playing, see the string through, make the odds work for us—"

"I tell you, I don't know anything about that money!"

Jarvis studied Cora Wilson shrewdly. "I think you do," he resumed. "I think you've been sitting on it for months. Fifty grand is a neat score, sure, but it's peanuts to what you could run up. You've got to make your own percentages in this rat race, doll. Think of the probability against you and the professor meeting tonight, of me being rung in, tabbing you both. Odds like that are fantastic. You want to buck them?"

"One moment, please," I told Jarvis bluntly. "I'm beginning to follow all this, but I assure you I haven't the slightest desire or intention of initiating any gaming assault at the Las Vegas casinos or anywhere else."

He wasn't rebuffed. "What's the matter, Professor? Afraid your theories won't hold up?"

"Of course not. Quite the contrary."

"You don't sound too sure."

Cora Wilson, regarding me with a steady, calculating look, asked,

"What did you mean by 'quite the contrary,' Professor?" she queried abruptly.

"Merely that I'm quite positive my theories *would* prove out," I told her, my tone testy. "That's not the point. I've already said—"

The girl was no longer listening to me but had switched her gaze to Jarvis. "How much?" she asked him. "How would we split?"

He grinned at her. "Even up; one-third each."

She continued to study him for another long moment, then drew a deep breath. "All right," she agreed, "I'll chance it. But not all the money. Only half."

Jarvis' grin broadened. "Fair enough. Twenty-five G's should be ample, eh, Professor?"

"It would be," I answered, "but I've already given you my position."

"So you'll change it." He cocked one wise eye at me. "You got anything against an early retirement or having your theories actually proved? You'll make the headlines; nobody will know where you got the twenty-five thousand for your initial stake. So what's the hang-up, Professor?"

I glanced at Cora Wilson, then back to Jarvis. Finally, I capitulated. "All right. I'm not too enthused but I'll go along."

"Fine." Jarvis grinned and spoke

to the girl. "Now, what about the money?"

"It's in a safe-deposit box," she said. "I'll get it in the morning."

He nodded. "There's a noon flight for Vegas; I'll meet the professor and we'll pick you up here at eleven." He took my arm and swung toward the door. "After you, Professor."

Once in the corridor, Larry punched my arm. "Bingo!" he exulted. "What did I tell you?"

I pulled off the bifocals, massaged my eyes. "You could've made it sooner," I said. "Another half hour with these, and I'd've been buggy blind."

"And maybe with some real gray hairs, eh?" He chuckled. "After you phoned and I knew you were in, it took a few minutes to hop a cab. Also, I pumped up that tire."

"For which you'll be amply compensated," I reminded him. "Twelve thousand, five hundred is nice pumping."

His amusement held. "Minus expenses, friend. I figure fourteen dollars, fifty cents."

We'd reached our car; I switched on the ignition, went along with his gagging. "That's pretty high, isn't it?"

He smiled, ticked off three fingers. "Coveralls, a year-and-model car trunk key to latch onto her jack at the Hi Hat, and bye-bye

juice. No charge for my time."

I sobered a bit. "Knockout drops?"

He said, "I figure that's the easiest way. No mess, no fuss. Now let's head for the sack."

Larry Jarvis, indeed, had done some figuring; hard, shrewd, concise. Three months ago, he'd been a dealer at a plush Las Vegas casino. The pay had been good, but Larry had thought to evade the keen eyes of the spotters on the invisible catwalk overhead, and pocket an additional take. He'd failed and been discharged, but not before he'd recognized Cora Wilson, and witnessed her dropping twenty-five G's at the tables; not all at once, but in a matter of days, in covert play, because Cora Wilson was a shrewd operator herself.

Once she had convinced the law she knew nothing about the fifty thousand dollars Leo Lassiter had entrusted to her care, she'd taken half the money, visited Vegas incognito and tried to run up a real score. She'd obviously been reluctant to risk the whole amount (which was the true reason she now professed to be willing to chance only 'half' in our proposal) because should her gambit fail, as it had, her cozy little nest egg would have been kaput.

Whatever, Larry had tabbed

Cora Wilson, wisely divined her plan. Convinced she could be induced to make a second assault should she believe the odds to be in her favor, he'd spent the intervening month mulling possibilities. He'd rung me in as a partner when we'd gotten to talking, exchanging confidences in a cocktail lounge where I'd spotted him working the short-change dodge so smoothly I'd had to proffer my professional compliments.

Finally, Larry had dreamed up the evening's "sure thing" bait, staged off-beat with the 'professor' bit as likely to appear more genuine to Cora Wilson, and now we were a scant ten hours away from those twenty-five thousand big ones.

We deliberately advanced the pick-up time the following day; it was only ten-twenty when Larry thumbed Cora Wilson's buzzer.

The girl admitted us with a ready smile. She was wearing a chic green traveling suit with matching over-the-shoulder bag. "You said eleven," she told Larry.

"We thought we'd all have a drink to start us off. You've got the money?"

She patted her bag; then her smile grew as she glanced at me. "You're drinking *again*, Professor?"

I'd redusted my temples, replaced

the bifocals, still toted the briefcase. "Let's say it's—ah—a special occasion," I suggested.

"Fine," Cora Wilson said, moving toward the cellarette. "Scotch still okay?"

"Fine," I echoed and then moved aside to allow Larry to "help". His movements were deft, akin to professional legerdemain. He'd palmed the phial of chloral hydrate and even had Cora Wilson been watching for the move, as she well might have been, she hardly could have spotted Larry's slick dosing of her drink.

As it was, the girl evinced no suspicion, raised her glass with another smile as Larry said, "Cheers."

Cheers, it was. After some light banter, abruptly Cora Wilson's lovely legs buckled and she slumped unconscious to the floor.

"Too bad, doll," Larry said soberly, "your luck just ran out." Then he indicated her bag. "Pack the money in your briefcase," he told me, "while I see if there's any more loot worth carrying along."

I was fumbling with the catch of the green bag when a whistle

of air warned me. I hunched, tried to duck, but I was too late. Myriad pinwheels exploded in my skull, then nothing . . .

Cora Wilson was still out when I got my senses back. Larry Jarvis was gone, as was the briefcase. The green bag, of course, was empty.

I swore softly; I'd been neatly suckered. Weaving, I headed for the door. From the standpoint of the money itself, Cora Wilson hardly could blow the whistle. Still, there was no point hanging around.

Abruptly, I halted, realizing I was holding something between my fingers. It was a brief note odds-maker Jarvis had taken time to compose:

Make those expenses nineteen-fifty. Five bucks more for one lead sap, deluxe model. Sorry about that, "Professor"!

I'd had a sweet chance for a bundle and I'd blown it. The only thing I had now was a splitting head.

Six, two and even: any finer, I couldn't get.



It appears, these days, there's a logical "method" to everythin'.



THE "METHOD" SHERIFF

by Ed Lacy

THE BANK was a small, modernistic building, a branch of a big city bank many miles away. It was built on a recently landscaped field on the outskirts of a sleepy village, facing a turn-off connecting the highway with a new bridge.

Sheriff Banes was much like the village: old, squat and shabby. Now, as he rushed into the bank, panting, the thin teller raced over to him and screamed, "Uncle Hank, we were robbed! Robbed!" Her face was pale with hysteria, eyes big with fright.

"A h-holdup?" The sheriff's shoulders sagged and his eyes seemed bewildered with shock. He shook himself, patted the teller's trembling shoulder with one hand, loosened the gun in his holster with his other hand. "Emma, you take it easy. Tell me what happened."

"Oh, Uncle, a—" Emma began to cry.

"Emma, call me Sheriff Banes; this is official business. It's important you get a grip on yourself, tell me exactly what happened." Walk-

ing the weeping teller to a chair, he turned to the only other man in the bank, the manager. "Okay, Tom, what happened? Make it fast, the first minutes after a crime are the most important."

way, I ran to the door, then I called you."

Sheriff Banes felt of his wind-breaker pockets for his notebook, finally grabbed a pencil and paper from the manager's desk. "Okay,



"We opened as usual at 9 a.m., a half hour ago. These two men came in. I was busy at my desk, opening the morning mail. The men were strangers, but they didn't look suspicious. Emma had her window open and Helen was in the vault. After a few minutes they walked out and then Emma screamed. They'd handed her a note, telling her to fill a big paper bag with bills or they'd kill us all. I heard a car drive off, but with so much traffic passing, I can't say in which direction they went. Any-

what was the exact time of the robbery, Tom?"

"I'd say . . . 9:32 a.m."

Nodding, wetting the pencil with his lips, Sheriff Banes wrote that down. "How much did they get?"

"I haven't checked, but around \$26,000, all in small bills." The manager sat down, holding his head in slim hands. "Hank, we only opened this branch three months ago and a holdup already. I'll be fired!"

"Stop moaning! Can you de-

scribe them pretty well, Tom?"

"Well, I only glanced at them, you understand. They both seemed about . . . thirty, of average build. Wore dark suits and . . . yes, the heavier one carried a shopping bag. He was the one without a hat and had black hair, neatly combed. The other one had a folded newspaper and wore a hat . . . I don't remember what color his hair was."

"I had a good look at them, Hank," Helen Smith said, coming out of the vault behind the tellers' partition. She was a middle-aged, dumpy woman with faded blonde hair. "The hatless one had very dark hair and a sharp face, a foreign-looking fellow, with one of those thin moustaches. The one wearing the hunting cap, I do believe he was bald and—"

"What color hunting cap, Helen?" The sheriff asked, pencil poised in his pudgy hand.

"Why, sort of a brown cap."

Emma sat up in her chair. "No, no! It was a kind of orange hat! He was the one who gave me the note, rested his folded newspaper on the counter."

"Did he talk with an accent?"

"Uncle, none of them talked, just gave me the note. It was typed and read:

'Fill this bag with money, or everybody will be killed. There's

a sawed-off shotgun in the newspaper. Wait ten minutes before giving any alarm. We have a man with a submachine gun outside.'

"I was so scared, I just shoved all the cash I had in my drawer into this big paper bag and nearly fainted! They were blocking my window, so I couldn't signal to Tom or—"

"Where's the note?" Sheriff Banes cut in.

"The note? Why, they took it, with the money."

Banes groaned. "Think carefully, Emma. Did you notice anything special about the shopping bag?"

"Yes! Now that I think of it, the shopping bag had A&P printed on it!"

The sheriff pushed his hat back and scratched his wild gray hair. "Damn, must be a dozen of those supermarkets within a fifty mile radius of here. Well . . ." He turned to the desk and picked up the phone. "I'd best call the State Trooper barracks. Anybody notice the make of their getaway car?"

The two women and the manager shook their heads. Emma said, "I think, but I'm not sure now, I saw an old gray sedan parked outside, through the window."

Shaking his head, the sheriff put

the phone down. "Anybody else in the bank?"

Tom said, "No sir, we'd just opened."

"How come you had so much cash on hand?" Banes asked.

"Now, Hank—Sheriff Banes, you know one of the reasons they built this branch is, with the bridge open, we handle the payroll for those two factories on the other side of the river, \$19,568 every Wednesday morning. We make up the payroll Tuesday nights. Then there's always five or six thousand in cash in Emma's drawer, at the start of a day."

Helen shook her head. "Don't know what the world's coming to. We never had a holdup before in the village, as you know, Hank. We—"

The sheriff suddenly walked over to the teller's counter, said, voice full of excitement, "Prints! Did any of you touch this counter?"

Emma shrieked, "I forgot! They both wore pigskin gloves!"

Sheriff Banes shook his head sadly. "Dammit, nothing breaking

for us." He crossed to the window and moved the shade, stared out at the night. "Might get some rain," he announced.

After a moment he turned and sat on the desk, tore up the paper with his notes. "Okay, that wasn't bad. Emma, you got to keep up your crying act more, especially when the State Troopers come. Aunt Helen, you were fine with that description, acted like a real confused hick. Tom, you were good, too, but you have to seem more upset. You know, like it's the end of the world. We'll have a last rehearsal tomorrow, Tuesday night, and I'll take the twenty-six grand with me. I've fixed up a nice hiding place under the floor boards in the jail. Wednesday, you phone me as soon as the bank opens and there's no customers. That's about all. Except keep in mind, we don't talk about this to anybody. We'll wait six or seven months before splitting the money. By then we all came into a little inheritance. Tom, how did I do?"

"You acted the part of a hick cop perfectly, Dad."



No matter how vital the deed, one's gratitude often is measured by the stature of his benefactor.

NO COPHOUSE is a place where I would spend time away from a plague, but me and Left Foot Hamish has no choice. We have been collared by Mulrooney and Ives who charge us with loitering up a bus stop when Left Foot stops to change the cardboard in his shoe. Mulrooney would bust his own mother for jaywalking—in her bedroom.

There has been a surfeit of illegal past-posting, suspicious winners, hubcap heisters and ticket tampering at Temple Park. Marks, touts and even citizens has noticed this and somebody explains it to the fuzz. Naturally they have to react, so they put the arm on known burglars, guys who stick slugs in weighing machines, and us.

"If they keep us overnight, Du-bois," says Left Foot, "they have to feed us, huh?"

He is always hungry. When he gets real hungry he gets delusions, like once he thought he was a banana. When we finally talked him out of it, he took off his peel, caught cold and nearly died.



I shush him because Big Ed, who is the biggest cop on the force, tells us to clear out. Big Ed winks at another minion. "Well, if it ain't the two-man crime wave." He points. "You two creeps just crapped out. Get lost."

I grab Left Foot and hustle him toward the door before Big Ed changes his mind. I hear him say to the other bluecoat, "Them two is dumber than umpires. They wouldn't know how to fix a game of hopscotch."

As we are going through the door the other cop says, "Yeah.

What time we hittin' the Club 97 t'night?"

I close the door before I hear Big Ed reply, and Left Foot is rigid. His eyes are so big they look like a brace of bass drums. "Holy pazazz!" he breathes. "They're gonna raid Faceless Robert!"

I also am nervous as an alderman in church. This raid is not a good thing. Naturally it is mostly not a good thing for Faceless, but when he is mad he spreads it

around like ripples in a beer vat—and one of the ripples could sink me. They always do.

I point Left Foot toward the Club 97 and we shift into high. The only thing to do is warn Faceless that the fuzz is about to fracture his future. But Left Foot digs in his heels and even though he weighs less than the centerfold photo in the Racing Form he slows me up.

"We can't go to the club," he pants. "Remember what happened last time?"

"But we were tryin' to watch Gloria's number. This is for his own good."

Left Foot shakes his sad little head and scratches his wispy hair. "It ain't safe. We best write him a letter."

"There ain't time. Maybe I can get him on the blower."

"He won't answer no phone. When they find out it is you they will hang up."

I reflect that this is also true. Faceless is surrounded by a whole horde of hoods who are so unfriendly they keep wolves—as pets—and they always do what Faceless says, even if it's legal.

So we shuffle in the opposite direction, to Katzie's Saloon. "What if Faceless finds out we are in the cophouse today?" I ask. "Ain't he gonna wonder if we heard about

by Arthur
Moore



the raid and didn't warn him?" "How could he? The fuzz never asks our advice. He knows that."

"Yeah, he does." Cops never ask me questions that they do not already know the answers to. Of course, sometimes they ask questions which have no answers, like: 'Are you still picking pockets?' or 'How come you ain't left town?'

Then I start to worry about Left Foot. He might talk. He has like a weakness. There is always a chance that some cat will lay a lager on him when he is hungry. When this happens the result is always the same. Left Foot will then sing *Danny Boy*, recite *Dirty Gertie from Bizerte*, and tell every secret he knows. There was a time when this meant he would expose the Dreyfus case (how Sam Dreyfus was short-changing for every case of beer), but now it means he would reveal how me and him did not tell Faceless about the raid.

I am so gloomy by the time we reach Katzie's that it does not even cheer me up to hear a city councilman has been arrested.

Jonesy is no help. Jonesy is the bartender, a tubby bigmouth who is too cheap to buy shaving cream. He uses day-old custard pie instead. "Faceless is gonna get raided!" he chortles. He smiles in his foolish way. "It's about time."

Hearing this, Left Foot clutches

the edge of the bar and stares at the door. "Not so loud."

"You better tell him about the raid," Jonesy advises.

"He won't lissen," squeaks Left Foot.

"Then you got like a problem," Jonesy muses. "You got to tell him and he won't lissen." He wiggles his moustache at us. "What you going to do next?"

He does not care, he only wants to know so he can inform everyone and take the credit for knowing how the massacre came out.

Desperately I split from them, leaving Left Foot leaning on a liter of lager. I tootle down to the Club 97 which is at 97 Broad Street. It is too early for the club to be open, but the bar is selling booze to a scattering of scammy looking tourists who are telling lies to a bored barkeep.

I slide inside and am grabbed in a grip of granite. It turns out to be an arm belonging to Gunny Smith. Gunny is snapbrim number one. He is tall, pale as a morgue slab, and bossy. He tells everyone but Faceless when to inhale and exhale.

"Get lost, Dubois," he says and gives me a little shove that drives me halfway through the plaster.

"But Gunny," I try to say, "I am—"

"We're upgradin' the clientele," Gunny growls, getting a clutch on

my collar. "You got all the class of a cop's red underwear."

Then he throws me down the front steps.

In the alley I meet Bindle Moran who is sifting through the trash cans on his regular route. "Hey, Dubois," he says, "you need some stove lids, or half a life preserver?"

I shake my head miserably.

"How about a kid's Dracula set with real dried blood?"

I tell him how I am trying to get in the club to see Faceless.

"But Gloria's number don't go on till eight bells."

"I know. It ain't for that." Gloria is a gold-plated pony who makes

other girls look like warmed over spaghetti—without sauce. She is the main event at the Club 97. When she wriggles, hula girls turn in their grass, and all you can hear for blocks around is heavy breathing.

Bindle starts to slip out and I realize that he all of a sudden believes I have a cog on tilt. Guys go to great lengths to stay out of Faceless' grasp. Faceless has no good points at all—aside from the ones on his teeth.

"I don't *want* to see him," I explain. "I just *have* to."

"Oh, that's different." Bindle stops and scratches his head. Sand dribbles out of his hair. He is a bum who does not pretend to be nothing but a mooch. He wears clothes rescued from the Chicago Fire, and a sad-puss expression that would wring wampum from a Mohican on his way to the Old Indians Home. He lays a boiled eye on me. "What you want with Faceless?"

"It's a secret."

He nods very wise, but looks surprised at the same time. "Then you are in on the merger, huh?"

"What merger?"

"Faceless is mergin' mobs with Roxy Callahan. It's the biggest thing since Big Al bought a war-surplus submarine from the Italian Navy to run alky in the old days."

I blink at him because this is Big



News! Faceless and Roxy together will corral the whole town! Their taxes will be terrible! "How do you know?" I ask him.

"Because it run aground off Hoboken and the cops was drunk for three days, layin' around in dinghies and—"

"Not the submarine, the merger!"

"Oh that. Roxy told me this mornin', he's on my route. I'm not s'posed to tell no one." Bindle pats my arm, then goes on looking into trash cans. "But you ain't anyone, Dubois."

I struggle out of the alley and stare at the Club 97 across the street. Now I *got* to tell them about the raid. It is life and death.

Gunny Smith saunters to the front door for a minute and lights a coffin nail and frowns at the weather. From a distance he does not look too mad, so I go over and stand on the sidewalk in front of the club.

In about two minutes Gunny comes out with another hood. I smile and say, "Aaarghbst," because that is all that is possible. Gunny and the hood grab me and walk up the street rapidly and they do not care that the only things that touch the ground are my head and neck.

They take me to the end of the block and drop me. I get to say,

"But—" once. There was a reason.

Gunny starts back, then he returns and kicks me in the side. "I hear you was in the sneezer today Sport. How come?"

I make like a fish with hiccups. I cannot get a word out and Gunny is disgusted.

"You a cop spy, Dubois? Hangin' around the Irish Clubhouse, huh? Why?"

"T-t-to-s-see Faceless!"

Gunny and the hood look like they have been hit by a runaway beer truck. Then they begin to laugh. "You're kiddin'," Gunny says. They laugh some more, and he kicks me and they go back to the club.

I am so shaky I lose two dimes trying to phone. When I get through to the club I try to disguise my voice but Gunny growls in my ear. "Knock it off, Dubois," and hangs up.

At Katzie's Saloon, Jonesy and Left Foot are playing checkers and Jonesy has won fifteen straight. He is in a good mood so he springs for lagers and gives me more advice.

"Forget it," he advises. "You have tried to make like Little Red Riding Hood swimmin' upstream after Papa Bear and he ain't havin' none."

"Faceless never forgets," I say. "Someday he is gonna find out we

knew." I motion at Left Foot and Jonesy nods very wise. Left Foot is still playing checkers, and even without Jonesy playing against him he still loses.

Jonesy shrugs. "Maybe you are worryin' for nothin'. Let's see." He draws two beers and slides them in front of Left Foot. "Go on, pal. Drink up."

Left Foot looks at the twin lagers like they are rich relations who owe him money. Ordinarily he does not expect such miracles.

"Go on," we urge. "Drink up."

Left Foot belts the brew before the mirage disappears. Inside of ten minutes he has sung *Danny Boy*, *Gertie from Bizerte*, and confessed to changing the date on a bus transfer.

Jonesy looks at me and wiggles his skimpy moustache in relief. Then Left Foot pulls the snapper.

"Did I tell you delegates about the time me and Dubois hear about the fuzz raidin' Faceless and we did'n—"

"Shaddup!" I scream.

"Start worryin'," says Jonesy.

"That does it," I say. "I have got to get word to Faceless."

He shakes his fat head. "Impossible. You been tossed out twict. The next time they will squash you."

"Well, think of something."

Jonesy frowns and wipes the bar

with the rag. He even bites the ends of the scraggly moustache. He is thinking so hard that wrinkles form in his nose. "How about Brazil?" he asks finally.

I sigh. "Maybe a note—they can't hang up on a note."

Jonesy shrugs. He ain't so sure, but I write a note anyway. I write: 'Dear Faceless: I know something important. I am at Katzie's.' And I sign my name.

When I show it to Jonesy he bites the moustache even more. But I hustle over to the club and point out Gunny Smith to a tourist and he takes the note inside.

It is late when I get back to Katzie's Saloon. Left Foot is soggy in a corner. I sit under the phone and bite my fingernails while Jonesy tells a couple of round haircuts how he used to call Big Al by his front alias. But the phone does not ring.

Instead, a long, slinky boiler whispers up to the curb outside and Faceless and Gunny and a modicum of muscle move in and mosey around the congregation. They dismiss everyone but us three, and Gunny starts to shake me.

"Assubghtnrr," I say.

"OK," Faceless growls, aiming the matchstick at me. "So you know about the merger, huh, that it?"

I shake my head furious. "C-c-

cops," I gasp. "T-they're g-g-gonna r-raid the c-c-c-club!"

Gunny snorts. "You're outa your cotton choppin' bird!"

Faceless chews his matchstick in two and looks very severe. He looks like a host who had nothing to serve because the blood bank is closed. "Don't fool wit' me, Du-bois," he growls. "No cop would raid my club."

Gunny shakes me and I stutter.

"Roxy coulda fixed it," Gunny mutters, then he shakes me and his head. "Naw, he wouldn't do dat."

"Naw," says Faceless. "He wouldn't do dat," but he don't look convinced. He gets out a new matchstick and lacerates it. "So you was tryin' to be a big man, huh, Dubois? Tellin' gees you could make Faceless come runnin', that it?"

"I been tryin' to tell you all day," I shout.

"T'row 'im in the car," Gunny says. "We'll ride by the gravel pits and—"

"Did I tell you delegates," says Left Foot, loud and clear, "how me and Dubois was in the cop-

house and heard they was gonna raid Faceless Robert—"

"Wait a minute," Faceless snaps. He goes over and passes his hand in front of Left Foot's eyes.

"We tried to warn 'im," Left Foot mumbles on, "but he wouldn't lissen."

"Oh yeah?" Faceless stares at Gunny who drops me on the floor. Jonesy says real quick, "He already sung *Danny Boy* and *Dirty Gertie*, Left Foot did."

Faceless nods. He is looking hard at Gunny who is white around the safety catch. Then the phone rings.

Jonesy answers it. When he hangs up he says, "The fuzz just hit the Club 97."

"Roxy set me up," Faceless snarls. "Dubois, you just saved my life. I ain't a gee to forget my debts."

"C-can I see Gloria's n-num-number?" I ask.

He stares at me a minute, then motions to Gunny as he goes out. "Give him his dime back for the phone call."

He still owes me a dime.



One may succeed where others have failed.



It was fairly late by the time I turned off the printing machine and arranged the finished snapshots on the table to dry. The back room of my photography shop was a pretty cozy place, with the walls covered with sample portraits and coffee simmering on the hot plate, and all my developing equipment handy.

I hummed to myself as I pulled some yellow envelopes out of a drawer, thinking I would just package these last sets and be done

for the night. Then I could relax.

The very last series was an odd one—a single and eleven blanks. Some nut had taken one picture and then slipped the film out of the camera.

Still, that one print had come out well. It was the picture of a man and woman in an affectionate pose.

I started to put it in the envelope and then I swore and looked at it again.

The girl had on a white uniform of some sort, and had her arms around the man's neck. Unless my eyes were failing me prematurely, I knew that man. It was H.J. Higgins from over in Danforth, THE H.J. Higgins. I didn't know him well—that sort of company was too rich for my blood—but I did know one thing. That girl wasn't H.J.'s wife.

I put the snapshot down carefully and lit a cigarette. This was an interesting development. From what I knew of H.J., he wasn't a very likable personality. He was supposed to be a big business tycoon, although everyone knew that the only money he'd ever seen was his wife's. She was loaded. Her father had bought up most of Ketchitaw County just before they discovered oil.

Yes, sir, I knew that picture was dynamite, all right. From what I'd heard of H.J.'s wife, she was no beauty. She had to be at least ten years older than H.J. Now this girl? Pure sex. Some people had all the luck—money at home and a girl like this waiting for him somewhere.

But it didn't make sense, not in a small place like this with everybody knowing everybody else. You

didn't let a girl take a photograph like this and let it be developed in a town fifteen miles away. You'd have to want a picture pretty bad for that. Not that I was much for gossip, but there were some . . .

On the other hand, perhaps H.J. hadn't known this picture was being taken. He didn't look as though his mind was on a camera. The way he was staring at that girl, like he wanted to eat her up—that sort of stuff was grounds for blackmail.

I stubbed out my cigarette and lit another. My fingers were shaking with excitement. Blackmail! Of course! That was it! That's what the picture was going to be used for. Somebody got the one shot needed, took the roll out of the camera and brought it here.

My fingers wouldn't move fast enough as I went through my files, looking for the name of the person who had brought in the film. Here it was—Frances Damon, and an address in Danforth. I stared at the address, wondering what to do. Actually what was there for me to do except put the snapshot in the yellow envelope with the blank negatives and put it behind the counter out in the shop to be picked up when Miss Damon wanted it? There was nothing pornographic about the picture, so I couldn't very well refuse to give

it back. I could pretend it hadn't developed, of course, fool around with the negative. Why, though, should I do anything like that? Higgins didn't mean anything to me. If someone wanted to blackmail the jerk, that was her business.

But was it? After all, I had done plenty of the work. Without me she wouldn't get anywhere. There was lots of Higgins money to be tapped, enough to go around.

I stood looking around the little room. Funny, but it didn't seem quite as cozy now. Actually, if I were absolutely truthful with myself I had to admit that the whole place was pretty run-down. The shop out front was scarcely eight by ten feet. The counter took up most of the room, and there was no place to display anything.

I thought of the kind of shop I'd always wanted—plush carpets, Swedish modern furniture, wide windows opening onto the street—so everyone in town could look in and see the kind of success Danny McGee had made of himself.

"His father was the town drunk," they'd say, "but the boy has made it big."

It was a familiar dream. I ran my tongue over my lips and then went to the phone and dialed a number in Danforth.

The girl's voice was warm, not

the voice of a blackmailer. I almost hung up without saying anything.

"Hello," I said, bracing myself. "This is Danny McGee in Alfred-ton—the photography shop."

"Is the picture ready?" She was excited. There was no doubt about that. I noticed she had said picture in the singular.

"It's ready, all right," I said. "It was a very interesting shot, I thought. H.J. Higgins ought to be real tickled with the way it came out."

There was a long silence, and then I could hear her breathing hard close to the receiver. "What do you want?" she asked finally.

"Just a little chat," I told her. "What about my bringing the picture over tonight?"

There was another pause, but I knew I had her where I wanted her. She was the loser either way. If she said *no* to meeting me, then she'd never get her hands on that picture, and if she said *yes* . . .

"All right," she said finally. Her voice was flat. "Bring the snapshot with you."

It was only a fifteen-minute drive to Danforth. At half past nine I walked up the steps of the run-down apartment house on Grifton Street. A girl was waiting for me at the head of the stairs.

"Mr. McGee?" she said as though she hoped it weren't.

I stared at her admiringly. She was the girl in the picture, which was just the way I had hoped it would be. I wondered if a partner had taken the picture, or had she, perhaps, rigged the camera so she could operate it at a distance?

I followed her into her apartment, taking in the slimness of her long legs and the graceful swing to her walk. It all proved that you couldn't tell a thing by a woman's looks. This one had blue china eyes like a doll's, and here she was, taking part in one of the nastiest kind of deals one person can pull on another.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. McGee?" she said quietly.

The furniture was shabby, but everything was neat and clean. I sat and looked around for an ash-tray.

"Did you bring the print?" she asked me.

I looked at her more closely now. She was standing next to the light and it was easy to see how scared she was. Her hands were clutched tightly together, and her knees were shaking.

I didn't mince any words. By the time I had finished, she was sitting very quietly in a chair opposite. Her eyes never left my face.

"All right," she said in a low voice. "It was a silly idea anyway. Not that it was mine. Oh, I'm not

making this up. I work at a sauna bath just down the street, you see. I'm a masseuse."

I nodded my head. I'd never been inside a sauna bath but I had my own ideas about what went on there.

"Don't look at me that way!" the girl exclaimed. "It's a perfectly respectable profession. It's only people like you in these dirty-minded small towns who—"

"You don't have to convince me of anything," I told her.

She took a deep breath. She was pretty cute when she was mad. "All right," she said. "Well, there's this man named Higgins, see. He came in once last winter, and then he started coming back pretty regular, always for a massage."

"Any hanky-panky?" I asked her.

"You look here!" she shrieked. "I don't have to sit here and let you ask me these questions."

"You want the picture, don't you?" I said.

"All right. About a week ago I got an anonymous letter. Here."

She pulled open a desk drawer and took out a piece of stationery. It was expensive, heavy, embossed stuff. At the top was a bird that looked like a vulture, but was probably an eagle.

"Whoever wrote this suggested that I find out who the man is who comes in every Thursday. The note



said he is married to a rich woman who is older than he, and that he likes to dabble around in politics and couldn't afford a scandal. It's quite a long note, says this man likes to fool around, but hasn't got caught yet."

I looked at the letter. It was just like she said. "It doesn't say anything about blackmail," I told her.

She shook her head. "But I think the implication is pretty obvious, don't you? At least that's what I thought of right away. Oh, it was a crazy idea. I borrowed a good camera from a . . . a good friend, and . . ."

I grinned. I imagined a girl like her had plenty of *very* good friends.

"... and he showed me how to set the time lapse gadget. I set it up in the room where I give Mr. Higgins his massage and—well, it was easy." She stared at me defiantly.

"This 'friend' who lent you the camera," I said, "does he know anything about all this?"

"No." She looked me straight in the eye.

"Just you and I know, then," I said softly.

She got up and began to pace around the room. "Look here, Mr. McGee," she said, "I'm grateful to you for stopping me from doing something I would have been sorry for the rest of my life. You can take that picture and tear it up. Burn it. Burn the negative, too."

I uncrossed my legs and stared up at her. It was a long cool stare, just to let her know the kind of person she was dealing with. "I don't know," I said, "whether that's such a good idea."

She stared at me. She was a cute trick, but not very quick on the uptake.

"I think your original plan is clever," I said, "and I thought you might want a little help. In contacting Mr. Higgins, maybe."

It took us a couple of hours to plan the whole thing. I was to get a fifty percent cut. We decided not to risk letting H.J. talk to either of

us in person. We could send him a copy of the snap; as long as we had the negative, it didn't matter. We could tell him how much money we wanted.

"It's going to be like taking money from a child," I kept telling her.

By the time I left, she was feeling a little better. I'd told her about the kind of shop I wanted, and she'd told me about her dream of going to California. I guess she'd had a pretty rough life. Her parents worked with a carnival and she never went to school long enough in one place to make any friends. She wanted a lot out of life. So far she hadn't got much, but I was going to help her.

I wrote the letter that night. I'd read some detective stories, so I knew enough not to try to disguise my handwriting, or use a typewriter. I cut letters out of the paper and stuck them in the right order. Then, just when I was about to put the whole thing in an envelope, I chickened out. There was something about letting H.J. have anything my hands had touched that scared the tar out of me. You could never tell what the police had up their sleeves next. Perhaps I'd been reading too much Dick Tracy. Anyhow, I decided to call him.

So I did. There was nothing to it. He was at home even though it was ten o'clock on a Tuesday

morning. I thought he would be.

"H.J.," I said, without any preamble, "I've got a picture you might be interested in seeing."

He swore at me a little. He was that kind of man. He had to hang up pretty sudden, too—I figured that was because his wife must have come into the room—but he agreed to meet me that night at Frances' apartment.

Frances and I celebrated in advance. We were going to let H.J. have a copy of the print, making it quite clear that we had the negative, and then we were going to ask for ten thousand dollars. It seemed pretty reasonable to me. We were going to play fair, too, and not keep the negative, or else keep it just for safety's sake. Five thousand was all I needed. As for Frances, that was more money than she had ever dreamed of having. Before I came along, she was thinking of asking for a hundred and fifty.

H.J. Higgins came as a surprise. I'd seen him around and summed him up as a blowhard, but he was a smart fellow. I guess it takes a smart one to marry money.

Anyway, he was pretty calm about the whole thing. He sat down with a drink and looked at the picture. Then he said he was surprised at Frances, that he didn't think she'd do a thing like that. For a while I thought she was go-

ing to break down and cry, or do something stupid, but I bucked her up. I said a few nasty things to him, and he turned nasty, too. It didn't take long before she could see that H.J. was the type who deserves to get the needle.

Like I said, H.J. Higgins was sharper than I thought. First thing I realized, he was saying something about his wife being willing to pay even more than he could for that picture.

"What the devil are you talking about?" I asked him. "The whole point of this caper is to keep your wife from seeing this."

"Oh, she knows I play around some," H.J. said.

He smoked these big cigars, and the smell was beginning to make me sick.

"Not that I want to cast any aspersions on your good name, Frances, my dear, but there have been other girls. And if there's one thing my wife doesn't want, it's publicity. Hurts her pride, I guess. She's bailed me out before, but never because of a picture."

Frances and I stared at one another.

"Now this is what we ought to do," H.J. said, leaning back in his chair. "Ask for thirty thousand for the negative. We could split that three ways nice and easy."

Like I said, H.J. was a sharp

character. Ideas were his forte.

Frances was kind of hesitant at first, but I showed her what a fool she was being.

"If it hadn't been for me, you'd have come out of this with a lousy one hundred and fifty," I reminded her. "Now the way we got it set up, you'll clear ten thousand. Don't numbers mean anything to you, girl?"

"One thing we got to make sure of is that my wife doesn't know I'm behind this," H.J. said.

He believed in being the big boss, all right. That kind of got under my skin. "We needn't deal you in at all," I reminded him. "It was a good idea you had, but we've got the negative."

H.J. laughed. "You'll cut me in all right," he said. "Because if you don't it's the end of the line. I've got some friends pressing me for money. If I couldn't raise some in the next few days, I was going to have to scoot out anyway. I know it's like leaving the goose with the golden egg, but I've got to pay up or get out of town. My friends are pretty tough customers. So you see, if I don't get the money that picture's no good to you anyway. I'll be long gone before my wife could even get out the checkbook and, believe me, she's not going to pay for nothing."

Well, I could see what he was

driving at, all right. As long as she had some chance of preserving her marriage, she'd pay. So it would be a three-way split after all. We had a few drinks on that, and made our plans.

We agreed that I was to go to Higgins' house, show his wife the picture, and make the arrangements. I was a little shy about this at first, but H.J. pointed out that if she didn't know I was coming there wouldn't be any tape recorders or hidden cameras or sneaking policemen. I only had to be careful to be alone with her when we talked. That way, she couldn't later prove I'd tried to blackmail her.

Bright and early next day I went up to the house. It was a big place on a hill, and my admiration for H.J. grew considerably during the ten minutes I sat in what I guess you'd call a drawing room, waiting for m'lady to come and talk to me.

Well, when I saw her I could see why she'd be willing to pay for a husband. She was probably the ugliest woman I've ever seen. There wasn't anything wrong with her face that plastic surgery couldn't fix, but she had a mean look in her eyes, and her voice was like the fine edge of a razor. Old H.J. had sure paid a price for all that money.

She almost scared me off. If she hadn't shut the door to the hall as

though she meant it, I would have cleared out of that place then and there.

"All right," she said. "Mr. McGee, isn't it? What do you want?"

"What makes you think I want anything?" I asked. I could have shot myself, because my voice quavered like a boy's.

"Nobody ever comes to see me unless he wants something. Come on, now. I haven't got all day. Has it got something to do with H.J.?"

I tell you that woman was eerie. She knew what you were going to say before you said it. I don't know what I told her, but first thing I knew she had the picture and was looking at it.

"Where's the negative?" she asked.

I told her I had it, and I would have told her that I meant to keep it, but my voice broke on me again.

"All right," she said.

The picture had disappeared into a pocket somewhere.

"It's—it's going to cost you . . ." My throat was so dry that I had to swallow.

"Cost me what?" she asked.

I can't remember the name of the dame with the face that was supposed to turn you to stone, but I wouldn't have been surprised to have felt my legs begin to harden. "Thir-thir-thirty thousand," I stammered.

She didn't say anything; didn't frown; didn't get angry; didn't cry. I tell you, she gave me the creeps.

Then, "You'll be hearing from me tomorrow," she said. "I'll send a message to your shop. You said you owned a—er, photo shop, didn't you?"



I went back to Frances' apartment. H.J. was there. He sympathized with me and, boy, now I could sympathize with him. We had a few drinks and Frances began to get pretty cheerful. She was a great girl when she let herself relax.

The next day H.J. and Frances showed up at the shop bright and early. H.J.'s wife hadn't said anything to him that morning, but he was pretty sure she was going to pay. I wasn't so certain.

H.J. and Frances sat around in the back room, and I kept busy as usual. Around noon H.J. began to get restless.

"Why in hell didn't you ask her for the money right then?" he said. "She could have paid. She's got that much in a safe in that damn house."

"You could at least have asked her when she meant to send the message," Frances said. "I can't stand much more of this suspense."

Just then the bell on the shop door rang. I went out and there was this boy with a big envelope. I gave him a quarter and when he left I put the "Closed" sign on the door and went into the back room.

"Yippeel!" H.J. shouted as soon as he saw what I had. "What did I tell you?"

He took the envelope and threw it at the ceiling. Frances caught it and threw it to me. We played a little touch football with it.

"All right, open up," Frances said finally. We'd all had enough by then. None of us were what you'd call fit, and we were breathing pretty hard.

I took out my pocketknife, opened it at the end and turned the envelope upside down. I guess what we all expected to see was a bunch of green bills come floating out, but there were only three small envelopes. One had H.J.'s

name on it, one had Frances' and one had mine.

"What the hell is this?" H.J. demanded. "This is her handwriting. How did she know I'd get anything she sent here?"

He tore his envelope open. There wasn't any money in it, but there was a big fat pile of legal papers. *Divorce papers.*

H.J. sat back like a man who's lost everything. His face was white and he didn't even notice that his cigar had gone out. "She can't divorce me," he kept saying over and over. "She can't divorce me."

It was Frances' turn next. Her envelope was smaller, ordinary lettersize. She opened it and took out some notepaper. I felt sick when I saw it. It was that same thick, blue stationery on which she had received the anonymous letter. There was even that same embossed vulture on the top. I leaned over her shoulder.

"Dear Miss Damon," it read. "Thank you so much for taking the hint. I couldn't have got such a fine picture without your help. My lawyer tells me this is all I need to

get rid of H.J. forever, and the lovely thing is, I won't have to pay any alimony. Yours sincerely, Isabel Higgins."

We stared at one another helplessly.

"What an incredible witch!" H.J. said finally. "I knew she was tight, but I never thought she'd go this far. It was all her idea. She's played us like puppets."

I could believe it. I remembered the look in that lady's eye. Yes, sir, she was clever, all right. I wasn't expecting any money in my envelope either, but the note that was there kind of took me by surprise. It was like kicking a man in the stomach when he was already down.

"The color snapshot of my husband that you brought to the house the other day was lovely," the note read. "I believe you said you have the negative, and I wonder if you'd do me a favor. I'd like to have an enlargement to keep as a souvenir of H.J. and Miss Damon. Use your own judgment as to the size, Mr. McGee. I'll be quite satisfied as long as it's suitable for framing."



Where familiarity breeds contempt, it follows that contempt may beget a particular progeny of its own.

THE EXPLOSIVES

EXPERT

BILLY EDMORE, the afternoon bartender, stood behind the long bar of the Last Stop Lounge and squinted through the dimness at the sunlight beyond the front window. He was a wiry man, taller than he appeared at first, and he looked like he should be a bartender, with his bald head, cheerfully seamed face and his brilliant red vest that was the bartender's uniform at the Last Stop. Behind him long rows of glistening bottles picked up the light on the mirrored backbar, the glinting clear gins and vodkas, the beautiful amber bourbons and lighter Scotches, the various hues of the assorted wines, brandies and liqueurs. The



Last Stop's bar was well stocked.

Beyond the ferns that blocked the view out (and in) the front window, Billy saw a figure cross the small patch of light and turn to enter the stained glass front door, the first customer he was to serve that day.

It was Sam Daniels. Sam was an employee of the Hulton Plant up the street, as were most of the customers of the Last Stop.

"Afternoon, Sam," Billy said, turning on his professional smile. "Kind of early today, aren't you?"

"Off work," Sam said, mounting a bar stool as if it were a horse. "Beer."

Billy drew a beer and set the wet schooner in front of Sam on the mahogany bar. "Didn't expect a customer for another two hours, when the plant lets out," Billy said.

"Guess not," Sam said, sipping his beer. He was a short man with a swarthy face, a head of curly hair, and a stomach paunch too big for a man in his early thirties—a man who liked his drinking.

"Figured you didn't go to work when I saw you weren't wearing your badge," Billy said. The Hulton Plant manufactured some secret government thing, a component for the hydrogen bomb, and each employee had to wear his small plastic badge with his name, number and photograph on it in

order to enter or leave the plant.

"Regular Sherlock," Sam said, and jiggled the beer in his glass.

"You notice lots of things when you're a bartender," Billy said, wiping down the bar with a clean white towel. *You notice things*, Billy repeated to himself, *and you get to know people, and when you get to know them, really get to know them, you've got to dislike them*. "I guess I tended bar in the wrong places."

"What's that?" Sam Daniels asked.

"Just thinking out loud," Billy said, and hung the towel on its chrome rack. When Billy looked at his past he seemed to be peering down a long tunnel of empty bottles, drunks and hollow laughter; of curt orders, see-through stares and dreary conversations. He'd never liked his job, but it was all he'd known for the past thirty years.

"Wife's supposed to meet me here pretty soon," Sam said. "She's getting off work early." He winked at Billy. "Toothache."

Billy smiled his automatic smile and nodded. He never had liked Sam, who had a tendency to get loud and violent when he got drunk.

Within a few minutes Rita Daniels entered. She was a tall, pretty woman, somewhat younger than her husband. She had a good fig-

ure, dark eyes, and expensively bleached blonde hair that looked a bit stringy now from the heat outside.

"Coke and bourbon," she ordered, without looking at Billy. He served her the highball where she sat next to her husband at the bar.

No one spoke for a while as Rita sipped her drink. The faint sound of traffic, muffled through the thick door of the Last Stop, filled the silence. When a muted horn sounded, Rita said, "It's dead in here. Put a quarter in the jukebox."

Sam did as his wife said, and soft jazz immediately displaced the traffic sounds.

"You know I don't like jazz, Sam." Rita downed her drink quicker than she should have, then got down off the stool to go to the powder room.

"Saw Doug Baker last night," Billy said, picking up the empty glass. Doug Baker was a restaurant owner who lived on the other side of town, and it was no secret that he came to the Last Stop only to see Rita Daniels, though Rita was almost always with her husband.

"How 'bout that," Sam said. "Two more of the same."

Rita returned to her stool, and Billy put two highballs before her and her husband.

"I was drinking beer," Sam said in a loud voice.

"So you were," Billy answered, smiling his My Mistake smile. He shrugged and motioned toward the highballs. "On the house. Unless you'd rather have beer."

"No," Sam said, "think nothing of it."

That was how Billy thought Sam would answer. His cheapness was one of the things Billy disliked most about the man. It was one of the things he knew Rita disliked most in Sam Daniels, too.

"How'd it go with the hydrogen bombs today?" Rita asked her husband. "Didn't go in at all, huh?"

Billy could see she was aggravated and was trying to nag him.

"No," Sam said, "and I don't make hydrogen bombs."

"Ha!" Rita laughed. "You oughta think about it. That's about all you can make." She turned away before Sam could answer. "Hey, Billy, you know anything about hydrogen bombs?"

"Naw," Billy said. "Your husband knows more about that than me."

"Yeah," Rita said, "the union rates him an expert. Some expert! Splices a few wires together."

"Five dollars an hour," Sam said, "and double time for overtime."

Rita whirled a braceleted arm above her head. "Wheee . . ."

Like many married couples, Sam

and Rita never failed to bicker when they came into the Last Stop. Billy laughed. "The Friendly Daniels." Sam didn't laugh.

"Don't bug me today," Sam said to Rita. "I'm in a bad mood."

"Cheer up, Sam," Billy said. "It's a sign she loves you, or loves somebody, anyway."

Sam ignored Billy and finished his drink. "Where'd you go last night?" he asked his wife.

"You know I was at my sister's. I even stopped in here for about a half hour on the way. Billy can verify it."

"Right," Billy said.

"I thought you said Doug Baker was in here last night," Sam said to him, his eyes narrow.

"He was," Billy said. "He, uh, came in late." He turned to make more drinks, placing the glasses lip to lip and pouring bourbon into each in one deft stream without spilling a drop. He made them a little stronger this time, shooting in the soda expertly, jabbing swizzle sticks between the ice cubes and placing the glasses on the bar.

"You wouldn't be covering up or anything, would you, Billy?" Sam's voice had acquired a mean edge.

"Now *wait a minute!*" Rita said. "If you think I came in here last night to see Doug Baker, you're crazy!"

"Well," Sam stirred his drink viciously and took a sip, "Billy mentioned Baker was in here . . ."

"I said he came in late," Billy said quickly.

"And he acted like he was covering up or something," Sam said, looking accusingly at Billy.

"*Covering up?*" Rita turned to Billy, her penciled eyebrows knitted in a frown. "Have you ever seen me with another man?"

"Naw," Billy said blandly, "of course not. You folks shouldn't fight."

Still indignant, Rita swiveled on her stool to face her husband. "Have I ever been unfaithful?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Good point," Billy said with a forced laugh.

"It's not funny!" Rita snapped.

"Keep it light, folks," Billy said seriously. "You know we don't like trouble in here."

"Sorry," Rita said, but her voice was hurt. She swiveled back to face the bar and gulped angrily on her drink. Billy could see that the liquor was getting to her, was getting to them both.

There was silence for a while, then Rita said morosely "I *oughta* go out on you Mr. Five-dollar-hydrogen-bomb-expert! You think I do anyway, and at least Doug Baker's got money."

Sam grabbed her wrist, making



the bracelets jingle. She tried to jerk away but he held her arm so tightly that his knuckles were white. "You ever see Baker behind my back and I'll kill you both!" He almost spit the words out.

"Hey, now," Billy said gently, "don't talk like that, folks!" He placed his hand on Sam Daniels' arm and felt the muscles relax as Sam released his wife. She bent over silently on her stool and held the wrist as if it were broken. "Have one on the house," Billy said, taking up their almost empty glasses. "One to make up by."

"Make mine straight," Sam said. He was breathing hard and his face was red.

"Damn you!" Rita moaned. She half fell off the stool and walked

quickly but staggeringly to the powder room again.

Billy began to mix the drinks deftly, speedily, as if there were a dozen people at the bar and they all demanded service. In the faint red glow from the beer-ad electric clock he looked like an ancient alchemist before his rows of multi-colored bottles. "You shouldn't be so hard on her," he said absently as he mixed. "Can't believe all the rumors you hear about a woman as pretty as Rita, and a harmless kiss in fun never hurt nobody."

"Rumors?" Sam leaned over the bar. "Kiss? What kiss? Did she kiss Baker last night?"

"Take it easy," Billy said. "I told you Baker came in late." The phone rang, as it always did during the fifteen minutes before the Hulton Plant let out, with wives leaving messages and asking for errant husbands. When Billy returned, Rita was back at the bar.

"Let's get out of here," she said. There were tear streaks in her makeup.

"Finish your drinks and go home happy, folks." Billy shot a glance at the door and set the glasses on the bar.

Rita drank hers slowly, but Sam tossed his drink down and stared straight ahead. Quietly, Billy put another full glass in front of him.

"I hear you *were* in here with

Baker last night," Sam said in a low voice. "Somebody even saw you kissing him."

"You're crazy!" Rita's thickened voice was outraged.

Billy moved quickly toward them. "I didn't say that."

"I know you were covering up!" Sam glared pure hate at him. "We'll see what Baker says, because I'm going to drive over to his place right now and bash his brains out!"

"But I didn't even see Baker last night!" Rita took a pull on her drink, trying to calm herself. Sam swung sharply around with his forearm, hitting Rita's chin and the highball glass at the same time. There was a clink as the glass hit her teeth and she fell backward off the stool.

Billy reached under the bar and his hand came up with a glinting chrome automatic that seemed to catch every ray of light in the place. It was a gentleman's gun, and standing there in his white shirt and red vest Billy looked like a gentleman holding it.

"Now, don't move, folks." He aimed the gun directly at Sam's stomach. "You know we don't go for that kind of trouble in here." He looked down and saw blood seeping between Rita's fingers as she held her hand over her mouth. Billy wet a clean towel and tossed it to her, and she held it to her

face and scooted backward to sit sobbing in the farthest booth.

Billy leaned close to Sam. "Listen," he said, his voice a sincere whisper, "I don't want to bring trouble on Baker, or on you for that matter, so I can't stand by and let you go over there and kill him and throw your own life away. It wasn't him she was in here with. He came in later."

"Wasn't him?" Sam asked in bewildered fury. "Who was it then?"

"I don't know," Billy said, still in a whisper so Rita couldn't hear. "He had a badge on, so he worked at the plant, but I don't know who he is and that's the truth."

"Oh, no!"

"Take it easy, Sam. She only kissed him in that booth there. And I'm not even sure I saw that. The booth was dark."

Sam tossed down the drink that was on the bar and moaned. He was staring at the automatic and Billy could see he wanted desperately to move.

A warm silence filled the bar, and then the phone rang shrilly, turning the silence to icicles.

"Now take it easy," Billy said, backing slowly down the bar toward where the phone hung on the wall. "A kiss isn't anything." As the phone rang again he could almost see the shrill sound grate through Sam's tense body. Billy

placed the automatic on the bar and took the last five steps to the phone. He let it ring once more before answering it.

"Naw," Billy said into the receiver, standing with his back to Sam and Rita, "he's not here." He stood for a long moment instead of hanging up, as if someone were still on the other end of the line.

The shot was a sudden, angry bark.

Billy put the receiver on the hook and turned. Sam was standing slumped with a supporting hand on a bar stool. Rita was crumpled on the floor beneath the table of the booth she'd been sitting in, her eyes open, her blonde hair bright with blood.

His head still bowed, Sam began to shake.

Within minutes the police were there, led by a young plainclothes detective named Parks.

"You say they were arguing and he just up and shot her?" Parks was asking as his men led Sam outside.

"He accused her of running around," Billy said. "They were ar-

guing, he hit her, and I was going to throw them out when the phone rang. I set the gun down for a moment when I went to answer the phone, and he grabbed it and shot."

"Uh-hm," Parks said efficiently, flashing a look toward where Rita's body had lain before they'd photographed it and taken it away. "Pretty simple, I guess. Daniels confessed as soon as we got here. In fact, we couldn't shut him up. Pretty broken."

"Who wouldn't be?" Billy said.

"Save some sympathy for the girl," Parks looked around. "Seems like a nice place. I don't know why there's so much trouble in here."

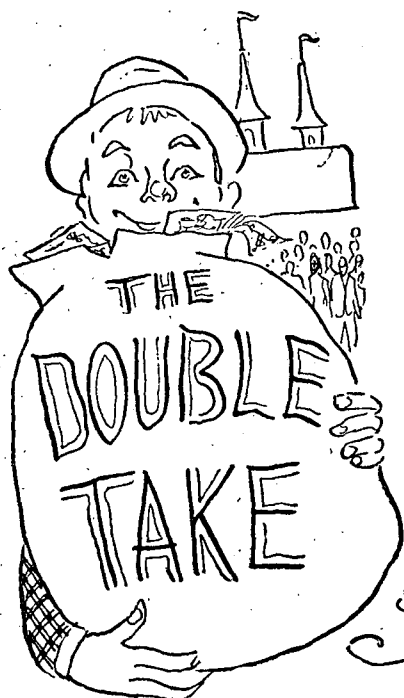
Billy shrugged. "In a dive, a class joint or a place like this, people are mostly the same."

Parks grinned. "You're probably right," he said, and started toward the door. Before pushing it open, he paused and turned. "If you see anything like this developing again, give us a call, huh?"

"Sure," Billy said, polishing a glass and holding it up to the fading afternoon light. "You know we don't like trouble in here."



Perfidy, that pernicious interloper, rarely travels alone.



Widely bet favorites, plus a huge crowd to share the take, usually bring a comparatively slim prize to the Twin Double winners. Conversely, if three or four longshots of the sort beyond logical prediction happen to cross the wire first during the Twin Double, the payoff is enormous, and there are seldom more than a couple of survivors competing for the jackpot in the last of the four races.

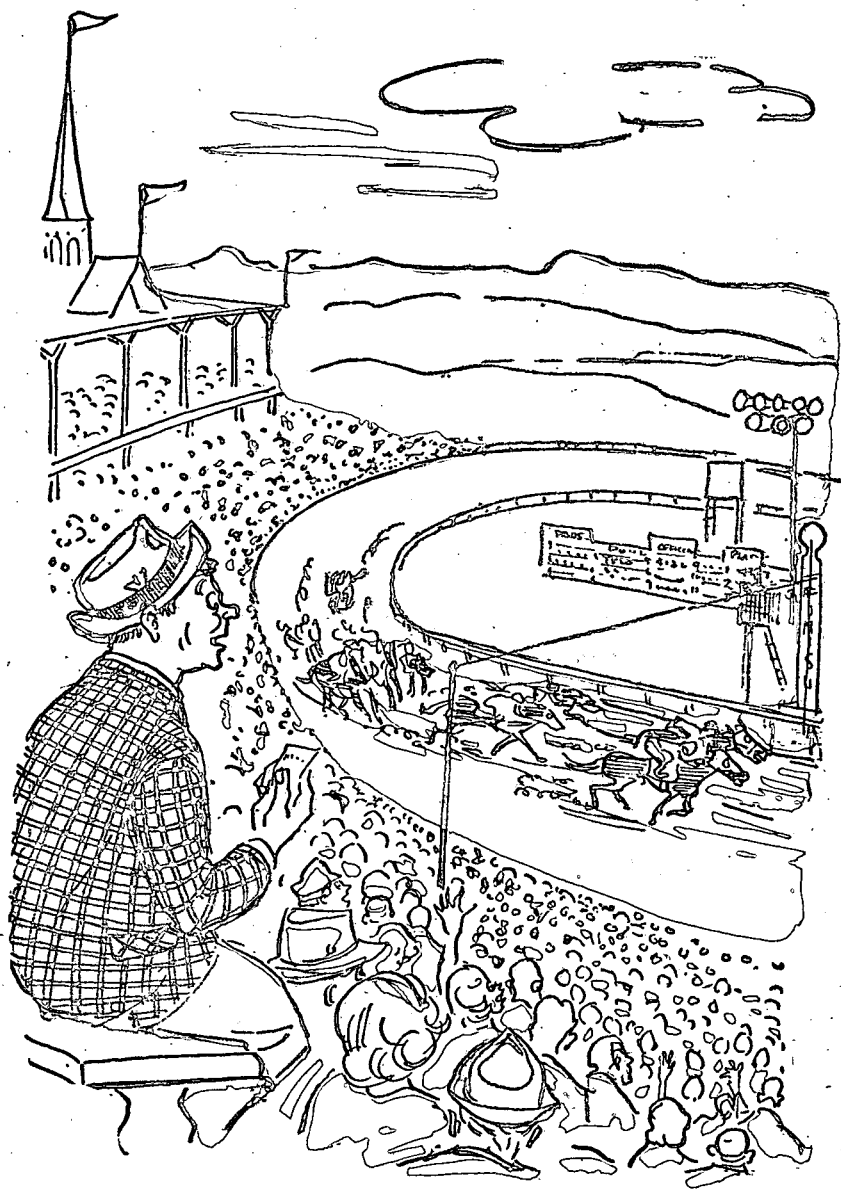
This was such a day.

Marty McCoy, a chunky, balding bachelor with amiable, if somewhat homely features, was one of

By Robert Colby

LATE ON a warm Saturday afternoon under a cloudless sky, the horses entered the track for the last part of that jackpot four-horse parlay known as the Twin Double. Some of the best horses run on Saturday, and very often it is a day when the favorites score heavily.

the two survivors, a solitary winner if his longshot pony showed his lean gray rump to the pack in the home stretch of the final contest. As announced a short time before, the holder of the other ticket was riding on Bold Conquest, a favorite. Marty's nag, Stingray, was going to the post at 16-1.



Sitting high up in the stands near the finish line, Marty squeezed his potential bonanza ticket between nervous fingers and tried not to think what alterations seventy-eight-thousand-three-hundred-dollars would bring to his barren, hustle-a-buck life. It was bad luck to contemplate the uses of cash, especially so large an amount, until the loot was in hand. It was worse luck to boast that one might be rich in a matter of minutes, so Marty concealed the ticket in his lap and kept his secret from the strangers who pressed about him.

At forty-one, Marty was a veteran die-hard at a variety of tracks around the country. Half a dozen systems, hunches and "inside information," had cost him a minor fortune since he was old enough to place a bet. Shy with women, skeptical of male friendships, he was pretty much a loner, though he could turn on a giant personality if there were a fast buck involved.

Except in rare emergencies when he took any old job near the tracks, Marty did not stoop to real and continuous labor. Sometimes he joined with one of the touts advertising sure winners, and milked a gullible public; or played runner for a bookie, or collected in the numbers racket. In a pinch, he knew a couple of risky con games, and on occasion he had written

checks with such high rubber content they might have been made by a tire manufacturer.

Marty, shrewd at scheming a living from the suckers, was himself a sucker for the horses and now, at last, and with the dumbest of luck (he had, in desperation, put names in a hat and had plucked the winners blindly) he was nearing the end of his rainbow.

Still, it was difficult to believe that his luck would hold, especially since the favorite, Bold Conquest, had been taking all comers in a breeze. Don't count your chickens, he told himself. A miss is as good as a mile . . .

As the horses paraded past the stands, Stingray looked fresh and eager. This was bad because Marty was always losing on fresh and eager-looking horses who collapsed in the stretch, while lathered, sulking bangtails romped home a freight train's length in front.

Now the horses were wheeled about, were fed into the gate—and were off and running!

Stingray sprang from the gate and immediately took the lead, holding it around the turn and well into the back stretch—which was bad because Marty could hardly remember a time when he had won with a horse which broke on top and led the pace.

Sure enough, going into the far

turn, Stingray tired and dropped back into fourth position. Meanwhile, Bold Conquest dashed up on the rail and drew ahead by two lengths, taking long, easy strides while the jockey, probably smothering a yawn, didn't even bother to apply the whip.

Clamping his eyes shut against the horror of such a defeat, Marty alternately cursed and prayed, though such prayers had never been heard in a church.

When Marty suddenly caught the name of his horse being cried over the PA system, he dared to open one eye. A miracle had been performed. Stingray was coming on again, challenging the leader, Bold Conquest. In fact, they crossed the wire nose-to-nose, whisker-to-whisker in a photo finish.

It was so close that even the know-it-alls in the stands wouldn't venture an opinion.

Five minutes passed in a creeping hush of time. Sweat beaded Marty's face and ran down his collar, and his heart threatened to stop altogether until the judges came to a decision. His eyes stared vacantly at the last digit on his ticket—"7."

Suddenly there was a great sighing of the crowd and a mounting murmur. Marty's eyes swiveled up slowly and fastened upon the board, focusing until the number "7" posted there seemed ten feet

tall. He blinked and looked again.

He had won!

For a long minute, Marty sat in silence, a crazy grin spreading across his face. Finally, he hoisted himself from his seat and limply, dazed and trembling, moved awkwardly down the steps. Near the bottom, still checking the number on the board to see if he might have been tricked, he stumbled and fell sprawling on his belly.

Shocked, but unhurt, he climbed to his feet. Standing, he was confronted by a young woman with compassionate eyes. "You all right?" she asked.

"Yes, yes," he answered. "Quite all right."

"Are you sure? You look kinda sick—pale, you know. I could call a doctor."

"Not at all!" he said heartily. "Never better. Just a little excited. That last race was close."

"Yes, wasn't it! Well, if you're perfectly okay—"

"Just fine—thank you." Embarrassed, a familiar shyness overtaking him, he brushed himself and started off again.

"Mister!"

He turned.

"You dropped this ticket, I believe." She was extending seventy-eight-thousand-three-hundred-dollars toward him. "It might be a winner," she said, smiling.

Almost rudely, he snatched the ticket from her hand and tucked it carefully away in a pocket. "Thanks," he said. "It is a winner."

He wanted to say more. He wanted to tell her that she was not only pretty but honest; and that the ticket had made him so rich he could take someone like her most anywhere, buy her most anything. Instead he gave her only a small salute and moved away.

Pausing at the nearest bar for that needed drink, he gulped it down while he kept fingering the ticket in his pocket to be sure it hadn't taken flight or simply disintegrated. Nearly convinced that he must be dreaming and if he didn't hurry the illusion would fade and he would awake, Marty paid for the drink and departed hastily to make his claim.

The cashier seemed happy that he had won, seemed eager to pay him off. Marty should have guessed that the man was hopeful of a handsome tip, but in his excitement the thought never entered his mind. He filled out the income tax form, making bitter noises over the big bite Uncle Sam gobbled from the top of his pile.

Did he want cash, or would he take a check for the remainder?

Marty snorted. Cash, of course! A check was only a promise on

paper, and who kept promises? Hundred dollar bills were stacked neatly in front of him. He counted every one, then peeled off five for pocket money before he stowed the bulk of the currency into a white cotton sack which was offered him.

At this point a reporter arrived to ask if he would be willing to pose for a picture which would be displayed in the newspaper along with his reactions and a brief biography. Marty refused with a chuckle, saying that he had too many friends and relatives who would descend upon him for a touch. In truth, he owed money everywhere; and further, the very last thing he wanted was publicity. Certain branches of the law might be most anxious to lay hands on him.

Finally, the cashier, now noticeably subdued, asked routinely if he would like an armed escort of guards to walk him to his car. Marty declined, said he could take care of himself very well, thank you.

The guards would be comforting, but their official status bore the taint of police and such types worried Marty unreasonably. So, removing his suit jacket, he screened the sack beneath it, then set off under a slanting sun across the vast parking lot toward his car.

Quite a few people were exiting,

but no one paid Marty the least attention. The walk was a long but happy one, for now he was allowing himself the luxury of mentally spending a sum close to fifty thousand, after taxes.

Arriving at his car, a sagging sedan, he climbed in and placed the money sack next to him on the seat before inserting the key. Instantly, he was joined by a couple of unwelcome visitors. The small dark man got in front beside him, while the tall blond one ducked into the back. The short man with the swarthy complexion exhibited a long-bladed knife which he held low, pricking the skin beneath Marty's rib cage. Something just as keenly pointed also needled the back of his neck.

"Crank up and move out, pal," said the dark man with the black tangle of hair and the slashing smile. He had splendid teeth of canine brilliance. "You won't get hurt," he continued purringly, "not a scratch if you do as you're told. All we want is the dough."

"C'mon!" said the blond one harshly. "Move it! Right out the gate. We get stopped for any reason, you bumped into a couple of friends. If he don't make like we're friends, Chino, cut him open and see if he's got a heart."

"Yeah," said Chino with another flash of teeth. "To be a frien' of

ours, you gotta have heart! Go, man, go!"

Marty tongued his lips and hesitated, but the knife at his side urged deeper and he turned the key . . .

They parted company on an isolated dirt road miles from town. "We're gonna borrow your heap," said the tall blond guy who had been addressed as "Swede" by the man called Chino. "Just until we buy a new one, like maybe this afternoon. Anyway, you got too much lard; the walk'll do ya good."

"Yeah," said Chino, "do ya good."

"I'd know you punks anywhere," Marty hissed. "And someday soon we're gonna meet again. Then it'll be my turn!"

"Yeah?" said Chino with a grin. "And if we was to meet again, what would you do to us, frien'?"

Marty was silent. It was bad luck to tell an enemy what you would do to him to even a score. Further, it was stupid to put these creeps on guard by telling them how he would find them and get his money back—with a bonus in bruised flesh—so he watched them fade up the road in a swirl of dust, leaving behind only the image of Chino's white-neon sneer.

After making his way home with the aid of an insistent thumb, Marty cooled long enough to re-

member the five hundred he had tucked so casually into his trouser pocket. With all that loot in their possession, the hoods had not bothered to search him and unwittingly they had left him a small stake. There was another eight hundred in a safety deposit box and the total would be enough to hold him above water while he carried out a plan which was already taking shape in his mind.

Marty had little doubt that he would turn up the cheap crooks before they could spend very much of the loot but, sooner or later, he would track them down. These characters knew their way around the ponies, were habitual operators at one track or another. Meanwhile, following the ponies would be no hardship for a guy like himself. It was just doing what came naturally.

Shortly after ten o'clock that same night, Chino and Swede were seated behind a dusky bar in a shabby section of the city. Needless to say, they were feeling no pain. Fortified by alcohol and the heady spirits of victory, they were celebrating. Chino, the last of the big spenders of other people's dough, had just bought a second round of drinks for the entire assemblage—a couple, five men of assorted lineage and dubious employment, plus two

snappy-eyed young women who sat together across the bar and glanced boldly in their direction from time-to-time.

Swede, the tall blond thief, whispered in Chino's ear, "That's enough, idiot! No more free drinks on us!"

"So why not?" Chino grumbled. "What's a few bucks when you got a carload?"

"Okay, we got a carload. But you wanna take-out a full-page ad? Any one of these goons would cool you for a C-note. So don't spread it with a shovel, and stop shifting your gut and poking with the hands. That's another ad you're toting a money belt!"

"Yours don't itch?" Chino murmured. "Mine is like a wet swim trunk. Maybe it's the green," he added with a toothy chuckle, "itching to be spent."

Swede only grunted and hoisted his glass.

Across the room, the small, tawny-haired girl standing beside the Amazonian brunette leaned toward the bartender. "Couple of live ones over there," she said from the corner of her mouth. "I can smell the cabbage from here."

The bartender slowly wiped his hands on a soiled rag before he replied. "Last week," he confided, "those two were stone broke. Wanted beer on credit. Suddenly they're

buying fancy drinks, two rounds for the customers. They hit it big somewhere, that's for damn sure!" He nodded sagely.

"I think you should buy *them* a round," said the brunette with a sly wink. "Tell them it's on us. And make it something dreamy—know what I mean?"

"Sure," said the bartender. "They'll sleep like a pair of stiffs in the morgue. Just don't forget my cut, understand?"

In the morning, Chino could barely locate his head, let alone his money belt. Swede had a similar experience, but while Swede raged and shouted vengeance, Chino was merely philosophical.

"There's one born every minute," he said. "So let's go find another one..."

Marty McCoy wasn't faring too well either. His underground sources were willing enough, but none had ever heard of Chino or Swede, and Marty's descriptions did not fit any of the local pros or even the known drifters who would sweep into town for a quick haul, then flee, only to reappear when the goodies were gone.

Finally, Marty came to the conclusion that he should stop wasting his time in his fruitless search for Chino and Swede, and try to re-

plenish his stake—at the track.

It had been raining all the night before and though a bright sun welcomed Saturday, the track was still sloppy. Marty was pleased. With an off-track, most anything could happen—like maybe three or four very long longshots stealing home to win the Twin Double.

Marty did not have a ticket on the Twin Double and was not going to buy one. Countless failures told him that his seventy-eight-grand win was a once-in-a-lifetime fluke which would never repeat. For more than two weeks he had been watching the outcome of the big double with intense interest, and so far, the largest jackpot was twenty-six thousand—a mere bagatelle.

Marty had hopes that this particular Saturday might provide a quite different story, and right as rain, it did! The longshots flew home to win like crazy, creating an upset which papered the ground with a carpet of losing tickets.

The Twin Double paid ninety-eight thousand, the largest payoff in the history of the track, and there was only a single winner!

Immediately after the race, Marty was leaning against a pillar not more than ten feet from the payoff window. He appeared to be studiously engaged in examining a racing form, but one eye was aimed

in the direction of the window.

He had a long wait, but eventually a well-dressed, beaming fat man showed to collect his fabulous prize. Marty was delighted to note that the fat man had the same high regard for payment in cash. Likewise, he refused the offer of newspaper publicity but, to Marty's dismay, when he left with a bulky sack of currency, two armed guards accompanied him.

Nevertheless, Marty followed at a safe distance to see if a break would develop. It was late, the fifty thousand dollar handicap had just ended and a great many people were swarming out to their cars to avoid the traffic jam which would follow the final contest. Thus, as Marty tailed the stout man and the guards on the long march across the parking lot, he was not conspicuous.

Arriving at the fat man's convertible, the trio stood chatting a few moments as Marty delayed. Then the man gave the guards each a bill, they all shook hands and Money Bags squirmed in behind the wheel. The guards watched him back and take a position behind a line of cars feeding from the track, then they departed.

Marty had figured his chances were good and when the guards began to walk away, he had taken a shortcut to intercept the blue



convertible, now crawling toward the exit behind a dozen vehicles. When the convertible pulled abreast, he stepped out from between two parked cars, the hand in his pocket clutching a small automatic.

"Harry!" he cried as he opened the door and hopped in. "Imagine meeting you, of all people!"

The fat man did not have time to get his mouth working before Marty showed him the gun . . .

It was another lonely dirt road, such as the one upon which Marty had been fleeced of his winnings. The fat man had been ordered to start walking and keep walking—in the wrong direction. As Marty

watched his retreating back, he clutched the money sack and drove off, experiencing a fine sense of poetic justice and a feeling of expanding glee.

Whistling as he turned a sharp bend in the narrow road, Marty was forced to brake sharply to avoid a broadside collision with a large black sedan which entirely blocked his progress. The hood was raised, as if someone had been inspecting the motor, but the car seemed deserted.

Marty didn't like the look of it, but there wasn't an inch of turning space and the other end of the road terminated at a reservoir. Climbing out, he approached cautiously, gun in hand.

He was bending for a close look inside the sedan when he felt the knife prodding his back.

"Drop it, pal!" the voice snarled. "Fast!"

He let the gun fall to the road and a hand scooped it up.

"Now turn around!"

Marty did an about face.

"Greetings, ole frien'," said Chino with a dazzling display of fangs. "If my hands were not busy, I would applaud. You learn good. Such a perfect pupil—the way you lifted the man's gold for us. It was a thing to watch, I tell you!"

Swede approached from the convertible, carrying the money sack. "I agree," he said. "We couldn't have done better ourselves."

"Yes," grinned Chino, "and our frien' is truly a prophet. Didn't he tell us, one day we will meet again?"

"And now look, he has found us!"



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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

A popular comedian of my general conformation would have an apt retort, I am sure.



THE Gumdrops Affair was not much of a name, really, for such an important assignment, but it was what the Department had labeled it later. It seemed they just could not take Addison Barnaby seriously.

It had all started when Addison received the mysterious package at the "drop" or pickup site, with the coded message enclosed. Under the wrapping paper was a white paper bag filled with gumdrops. Addison almost ate one of them, because it had been several hours since his last meal, but he decided to decode the message first. He had been glad that he did.

The gumdrops, the message said, were sugar-coated lumps of a new jelly explosive, samples on their way to certain persons in Dar Es Salaam. Addison, in Nairobi, was to meet with the courier who would carry the gumdrops—that is, explosives—to Tanzania, and deliver them to the right people. The message had said the fellow was

By Ralph E. Hayes

Brian Thompson, and that he was British. He had spent much of his life in that area, and was supposed to have been, at one time, a white hunter.

As Addison rode in the taxi to the New Stanley Hotel that sunny morning to deliver the white bag to Thompson, he realized with a sudden clarity that he had a good life. The Department always kept him in out-of-the-way places, hoping he would not get into trouble. He knew why, of course. He was over forty, and getting potty and bald, but would not take a promotion. He had never been an aggressive agent; he liked people too much, he guessed. He would never, for example, even think of actually killing another man. There were always less violent means of coming to grips with a situation. Recently he had even begun carrying his .38 unloaded (the Department would have been outraged) just to be sure he would not make the error of shooting somebody.

Addison liked to think, though, that he made up for his lack of killer instinct with a pedantic dedication to his work and a love of detail. Wherever he was sent, he plunged into the life of that area with abandon, spending off-hours learning the customs and mores of the people and other interesting facts. That was why, he suspect-

ed, the Department kept him on. Despite his dislike for violence, he usually managed to get the job done, primarily because he was a walking encyclopædia of facts. He also had a black belt in judo and karate, but never spoke of it.

Addison arrived at the New Stanley just before ten. He disembarked at the curb, paid the driver, and walked through the Thorntree Restaurant, speaking to a waiter who knew him.

"*Jambo!*" Addison smiled.

"*Jambo sana, sahib,*" the man grinned.

At the desk, Addison asked if a Thompson were registered.

"Room 315, sir," the British girl said.

"Thank you," Addison said. He went to the elevator, feeling for the white bag in his pocket. No, he had not forgotten it. He got off the elevator on three and walked to the room.

Before knocking on the door, he checked his revolver to be sure it was empty. He knocked and waited. The door opened and a tall man stood there.

"I'm afraid you have the wrong room, sir—" the man began.

"I'm Addison Barnaby."

The other man looked down at him with ill-hidden contempt. "Is this some kind of joke?"

Addison grimaced. Nobody ever

took him for a secret agent. "The password is *uhuru*," he said patiently.

"Yes," the man said, incredulously. "It is. I'm Thompson. Come in, please."

Addison stepped into the room and the other man closed the door behind them and locked it carefully. "You'll have to excuse me," he said. "I had expected a—"

"Larger man?" Addison smiled.

"Well, yes."

"Everybody does."

"You'll forgive me, but you remind me very much of my shoe clerk in London," the taller man said.

Addison did not mind the gratuitous insult. It gave him insight into the man's personality. "Everybody looks like somebody else," he smiled. "What is the answer to the password, if you please?"

"Oh. Sorry, chap. *Hatari*."

It was the right answer. Addison reached into his pocket. "I won't stay longer than is necessary to make the transfer," he said. "I don't want to put you in danger. I may be known by more people at the hotel than I realize." He pulled the white bag out of his pocket and handed it to the man.

"Well," said the man who called himself Thompson, looking into the bag. "Well."

"It's all there," Addison said.

"Although I almost did eat one."

The other man thought he was joking, and laughed loudly. "*Santa sana*," he said then, lightly.

Addison nodded, and his face sobered. Why the formally polite form of thanks? You just didn't use that form in Swahili, unless you were indebted to the person for life, or unless you didn't really know Swahili. However, Thompson was supposed to have been a white hunter for several years.

"Happy to have been of help," Addison said.

"Will you have coffee or tea with me?" The man placed the bag on the nightstand near the bed.

"No, thanks, I just had breakfast," Addison said. "I did mean to ask you about your days as a hunter, though. It must be a very interesting way to make a living."

"Quite." The man lit a cigarette and took a long drag. "I'm keen for the bush, even now. I miss the lion, the cry of the hyena at night, and the herds of water buffalo."

"I can imagine," Addison said, and a small smile appeared on his face. Water buffalo in Africa? A domesticated beast used in Asia to pull carts and such? The man had obviously meant to say Cape buffalo, the most dangerous of the Big Five. Yet a white hunter would not make such an error. A white hunter would have been face to

face with buff on many occasions, and the proper name would have been etched indelibly in his mind.

Addison watched the other man smoke, and glanced across the room at the bag of explosives he had just delivered.

"Yes, I miss the tenting and the fresh air," the other man was saying. His right hand hung at his side with the cigarette in it. There was an elephant tail bracelet on his wrist above the hand.

"I see you have a tail bracelet," Addison said.

The man looked at his wrist. "Yes. Killed the poor devil in the Northern Frontier District. Stalked him for five hours. Two hundred pounds of ivory."

"It's very nice," Addison said. Yes, a beautiful little story. You *do* find elephants in the NFD, and you *could* stalk one for five hours, and that much ivory *was* something to brag about—but you don't wear the bracelet on your right wrist if you've killed the elephant. You wear it on the left wrist. It is worn on the right wrist by tourists for good luck. It had not brought any to this man who was not Thompson.

Addison reached into his jacket casually, pulled the revolver out, and pointed it at Thompson.

Thompson's eyes narrowed and he carefully placed the cigarette on

a nearby ashtray. "What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Nothing. It's you," Addison said. "You're not Thompson."

The tall man looked at the gun. "How did you know?"

"Never mind. Just step away from the nightstand." Addison would retrieve the explosives first, then call the police to deal with the tall man.

"All right." The man started away from the bed, then dived at Addison's waist, hitting him hard and throwing him to the floor. When they both had struggled to their feet, the other man had Addison's gun.

"Sorry, Barnaby," the man said. "I don't like to kill another professional. But this time it's necessary." He squeezed the trigger and the hammer clicked harmlessly. He pulled it again. He looked at the gun, frowning.

"It's not loaded," Addison said.

"Not loaded?" the man said. He shook his head slowly, then started for Addison, ready to hit with the gun.

When he swung the revolver at Addison's head, Addison realized he must use a minor degree of violence to avoid a bruised skull. He grabbed the man's hand as it came down toward him, and the next moment his opponent was sprawling on the floor, groaning.

"Sorry to have to do that," Addison said. He leaned down and slipped an old pair of handcuffs onto the man's wrists, being careful not to damage the bracelet.

Addison went to the nightstand then and put the bag into his pocket. The man on the floor was sitting up slowly, stunned. Addison picked up the phone.

"What are you doing?" the man asked. His accent was no longer British.

"Why, I'm telephoning the police," Addison explained.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm on your side. Thank goodness. Look in my billfold."

Addison walked over to him cautiously. Some kind of trick? He reached into the man's pocket and withdrew the billfold. "You open it," he said, giving it to the man.

The tall young man grinned. "Okay, okay. Here." He fumbled through some things and handed Addison a card. "Look at this."

Addison took the card slowly. It was a Department card. He looked at the man. "You're not serious?"

"Yes."

"Name some names."

The man did.

"Good Heavens!" Addison Barnaby said.

"Every once in a while, as you

know, we test agents. For loyalty, and for—efficiency. You passed." The man stood up clumsily, and Addison looked at him.

"But you tried to kill me with my own gun," he protested.

"No. I aimed carefully over your left shoulder."

"Oh, I see. Well, I'm sorry about the judo." He unlocked the handcuffs, and the tall man held out his hand to him.

"Frank Guthrie," he said. "It's a real pleasure, Addison."

Addison shook his hand, and they both grinned.

"That shoe clerk bit was just part of the act," Guthrie explained. "To make you believe the whole thing."

"Don't apologize," Addison said. "I do look like a shoe clerk." He pulled the paper bag out of his pocket, peered inside curiously, then looked up at Guthrie, still grinning. "Do you mean—"

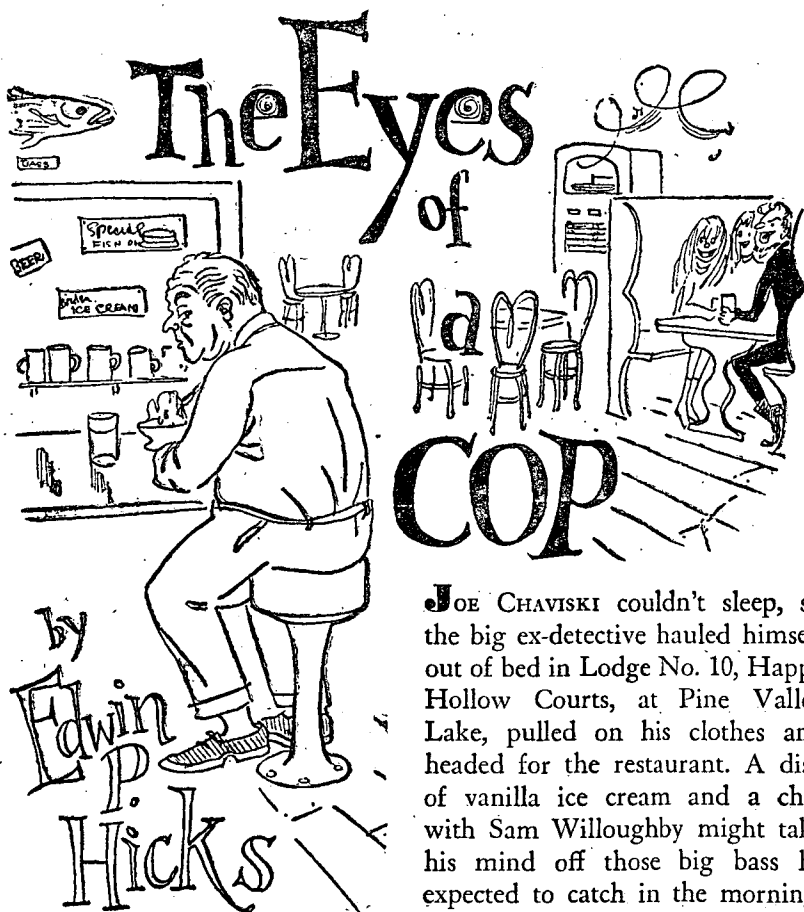
"Yes," Guthrie admitted.

Addison pulled one of the soft sugary blobs out of the bag and popped it into his mouth. He bit down on it. It was lemon, and delicious. "Very good!" he said. They both laughed. "What flavor will you have?"

"I always used to like the red ones," Guthrie said.

Addison laughed again, and offered his colleague a gumdrop.

While one's eyes may be focused upon a particular object, the perimeter of his vision will register the background.



JOE CHAVISKI couldn't sleep, so the big ex-detective hauled himself out of bed in Lodge No. 10, Happy Hollow Courts, at Pine Valley Lake, pulled on his clothes and headed for the restaurant. A dish of vanilla ice cream and a chat with Sam Willoughby might take his mind off those big bass he expected to catch in the morning, and then he could get some sleep. Funny how a man his age, with

a thousand fishing trips behind him, still got stirred up the night before the thousandth and one for-ay after bass.

It was 10:15. A jalopy with an Oklahoma license plate was parked in front of the restaurant. The car was grimy with dirt and spotted with oil, and somehow didn't look "right" to him. Joe realized it was his old copper's instinct and grinned. It was hard to forget he was no longer a police officer, no longer a young man.

Joe plunked his 255-pound body on a leather covered stool at the counter. The jukebox was making a racket, with some asinine drug-store cowboy singing through his nose a mournful ballad about a blonde siren who had taken him from home and loved ones.

Four crummy looking individuals, two young men and two frowzy blondes in tight stretch pants and low-necked blouses, occupied the booth next to the jukebox.

Sam Willoughby wasn't there, and Mrs. Willoughby was red-eyed and extremely nervous when she placed Joe's order of ice cream before him.

"Oh, Joe," said Mrs. Willoughby, "I'm so glad to see you. Sam's gone home sick and I'm afraid it's appendicitis. I'm so worried about him."

"Why don't you close up this place and go to him?"

Mrs. Willoughby nodded toward the occupied booth. "Just as I was about to close up for the night, those four came in," she said. "I've just served them. I don't like their looks, and I'm afraid they'll hang on and on."

"Give me their ticket," said Joe. "If they need beer or coffee I'll get it for them. You run on home to Sam. I'll close up."

"Would you, Joe?"

"Sure. And if you and Sam need anything—me to drive him to the hospital or anything like that—just let me know. I'm in Number Ten."

"Joe, you're a darling," said Mrs. Willoughby. She left at once.

Joe was absorbed in his ice cream and thinking about Sam Willoughby when one of the men shouted, "Hey, Fat! You in charge here?"

Joe turned and looked at the fellow. He was lean and bronze, his right ear had the mark of the fighter trade, flattened into a beautiful cauliflower, and his nose was out of line to the left. The other man was dark-skinned, with fiercely black hair.

"Yeah," Joe answered, keeping his temper. He didn't like to be called *Fat*. "I'm in charge. You need something?"

"Beer," said the bronzed one.

"Beer all around and make it snappy."

Joe opened four bottles of beer and carried them over to the booth, two bottles in each of his big hands.

"That's a hell of a way to serve beer," said the one who had been popping off. "Don't you know any better than that, Fat?"

Joe grunted, added the amount of the beer on the check, and started to go back to the counter.

"You don't like to be called Fat, do you, Fat?"

"No, it doesn't go over so well with me."

"That's too bad." The tough slyly stuck out one foot to trip Joe as he turned. Joe stepped on the foot heavily, and the fellow yelled, then swore.

"Serves you right," one of the blondes said, laughing.

"Yeah? Well, we'll see who's laughing before we leave here."

They ordered more beer and kept the jukebox rattling with hill-billy music. Joe glanced at the clock. It was now 10:50. All the occupants of the cabins were sound asleep. There would be nobody else in tonight. He hoped they'd drink their beer and leave without any trouble.

They called for more beer. "This place closes at eleven," said Joe, as he placed the beer on the table.

"We'll leave here when we feel like it, Fat," said the young tough.

Joe added the price of the beer to the check and ambled back to his stool. Lucky he hadn't been able to sleep. No telling what would have happened if Mrs. Willoughby had been alone when this quartet showed up. Sam kept a .45 automatic in the drawer beneath the cash register, and no one was ever going to run over Sam, but Mrs. Willoughby would have been helpless. These four meant to cause trouble.

They were quarreling now over in the booth—the young hoodlum who had been rubbing Joe the wrong way, and one of the women who sat across the table with the dark one. The other woman was chiming in shrilly from time to time. They called the dark, silent man Pedro, while the other was Frenchy.

Now it was eleven o'clock, and Frenchy was hammering on the table and yelling for more beer.

"I can't serve you more beer. It's closing time," Joe said. "You people will have to leave."

"I said more beer!" Frenchy shouted.

Joe moved over to the table. "And I say pay up and get out!"

Frenchy came to his feet with surprising speed, considering the beer that was in him. The woman

sitting beside him caught at his arm. He turned and slapped her.

Joe grabbed Frenchy by the collar, and the hood exploded a fist against his chin. The punch was a dandy, and Joe went back against the counter. He came back with startling speed and gathered Frenchy in his arms, squeezing him until the air sighed out of his lungs like a protesting accordion. Then Joe discovered he was fighting a wildcat. He had subdued one end, but the other was walking up him, kicking, scraping, stomping, kneeling! Joe threw Frenchy down and sat on his middle. He sank his great hands into both biceps of his opponent, until he could feel the bone beneath his fingers.

"Put the money for the bill on the table in the booth," Joe told the others, "and then get out of here. As soon as you get out the door I'm throwing this clown after you and closing up."

They placed the money on the table.

"Now get!" said Joe.

"Mister, you don't know what you're in for," said the woman who had been slapped. "You'll have to kill him. Why don't you go ahead? I'd like to see you kill him."

"Go on! Beat it!" said Joe.

They went out the door, the women clattering their heads off.

"They're right," said Frenchy.

"You don't know what you're in for. I started wanting to tangle with you the minute I saw you come in this dump. Any man as big as you I want to take a poke at."

"Mister," said Joe, "I'm a retired police officer, and I haven't got any quarrel with you at all. Now I'm letting you up, and you leave here like a good fellow. I don't want to have to hurt you."

Joe got up and stood ready to spring at the tough if he still wanted to mix it. Frenchy turned and started for the door. The next thing Joe knew, a chair was hurtling toward his head, with Frenchy, heels first, right behind it. Joe sidestepped the chair but couldn't quite miss the heels. One foot grazed his stubby temple, the other struck his shoulder.

Joe twisted with the blow and got Frenchy from behind, wrapping one great arm around his belly and pressing down against the back of his neck with his forearm. He put on the pressure until he was afraid he would crush Frenchy's backbone. Then he hurled the body through the screen door and turned to slam the wooden door—and Frenchy was back, pummeling him in the face with slashing lefts. It was like backing a jackhammer with your chin.

The big man pawed the flashing



left down with his own left and sent a sledgehammer right-cross into Frenchy's face. The blow only partly connected because the target was moving, but Frenchy went to the floor. Joe was after him, swallowing him up like an open umbrella, and he hit down at his opponent mercilessly. Some of the blows landed, but most of them were off target because two hard knees were banging against Joe's back, and the head rolling against the floor was like that of an old-time pug on the ropes dodging the knockout punch.

Joe Chaviski, veteran of the hand-to-hand combat that comes with thirty years on a police force, was a hard man to get riled. He had once killed a man who had

gone berserk by breaking his neck with his bare hands—and had saved a carload of teenagers in so doing. Now no one's life was involved except his own, and he figured he could take care of that. So again he let Frenchy up from the floor.

It was a mistake! The battle started all over again—the giant heavyweight, who was getting along in years but who was surprisingly fast for his size, and the tough, scrapping middleweight who wouldn't quit!

Joe got his man down several more times, but he couldn't keep him there. Frenchy not only appeared to enjoy the combat, but also knew quite a bit about judo and was as fast as ever. The two

women and the dark-skinned Pedro were back inside again, watching the fight and cheering first one, then the other.

Joe began to get tired. It was like fighting fifteen rounds at top speed and no stopping between rounds.

Now, Frenchy was grinning! It seemed the more he was hit the stronger he got.

Joe was more angry now than he had ever been in his life. He yelled at the other man and the two women, "See if you can't make him stop! What the devil's the matter with him?"

"Kill him, big man! Kill him!" the woman who had quarreled with Frenchy shouted, laughing.

Frenchy had the endurance of a lobo wolf. There seemed no stopping him. Joe's great fists sent him flying across the restaurant a dozen times, but Frenchy came rushing back.

Joe was panting now, his face cut, bruised, and bleeding. His left eye was almost closed. His chest, belly, and groin had been pounded and kicked. This fight couldn't go on much longer. It couldn't go on because he was going down—he, Joe Chaviski, who sometimes had handled a half dozen men at a time.

There was one more supreme effort in Joe. He caught the wrig-

gling head of Frenchy in his left hand and smashed the grinning face with his right fist. This time Frenchy relaxed all over. He was out cold. He might even be dead! Joe didn't know. He was past knowing anything. Staggering drunkenly on his last legs, Joe dragged Frenchy to the door and hurled him out into the night.

Joe came blindly back through the door, and the two blondes ran to him and hugged him. "Our champion!" one of them said. "Frenchy's had that licking coming to him for months. I hope you killed him!"

Joe shook them off. He didn't have breath enough left to waste words. He tottered back of the counter, got the .45 from beneath the cash register, staggered out front with it in his hand.

"All right, get!" he said. "Get the hell out of here, all of you!" The gun was pointed at Pedro, who turned without a word and started for the door. Out of the corner of his eye, Joe saw the flash of the beer bottle wielded by one of the blondes, but it was too late to duck.

Someone was shaking him, and Joe was looking up at the clock, and the time was ten minutes before midnight! The man shaking him was a state patrolman, while

an officer in plainclothes was by his side.

"Come on, Chaviski, wake up!" the state patrolman was saying. "What's been going on here, Joe?"

"I had one hell of a fight with a wildcat of a hoodlum, and one of his broads let me have it with a beer bottle."

"And how do you explain this?" asked the man in plainclothes. Joe recognized him as Sheriff Garton of Blakely City.

"This" was the body of Frenchy! There was an ugly bullet hole through the side of his head, another under his left arm.

The .45 automatic which Joe had brought from behind the counter was on the floor near where Joe's hand had been. The patrolman stuck a pencil through the trigger guard, lifted the weapon, and sniffed. "It's been fired all right. Did you kill the man, Joe?"

"No," said Joe, "I sure didn't. I had finally put this guy they called Frenchy away after we'd been going it for about thirty minutes. I threw him out the door for keeps, then went around the counter and got Sam Willoughby's gun and was running out the other three, a dark-complected guy and two women, when this floozie comes up behind me and lets me have it with a bottle. They were all full of beer and had been quarreling. I

figure it must have been this dark guy let Frenchy have it, then tried to make it look like I did it."

The back of Joe's head felt like it was about to come off. He placed his hand back there, touched a knot the size of a hen's egg, and drew the hand away, bloody. Joe steadied himself by holding onto a chair, looked about the place with glazed eyes.

Sheriff Garton got a first aid kit out of his car and bandaged Joe's head. A search of Frenchy revealed very little. There was a driver's license in his billfold made out to Henry Gazzola, Douglas, Arizona—probably stolen—and something like fifty dollars in bills. That was all. There were various tattoo marks on the arms, including the outline of a heart, with the initials "G.F." inside the heart.

The rest was routine. Joe accompanied Sheriff Garton to Blakely City, taking his own car, and a call was put in by radio for an ambulance to remove the body. The state patrolman remained at the restaurant.

Joe gave the Blakely City police a description of the two women and Pedro, and the license number of the Oklahoma car. True to his police training he had made a mental note of the license the moment he spotted the car in front of the restaurant. It was a Sequoyah

County, Oklahoma, license. Radio messages to the sheriff's office there revealed that the license had been taken off a car in a parking lot four nights previously. In all likelihood they would steal another license plate before daylight, or even another car.

Nevertheless, routine roadblocks were set up at Texarkana, Fort Smith, Little Rock, Shreveport, Mena, and DeQueen, but the trio could leak through this broad net on a hundred back roads in the area.

In the meantime Joe told everything he knew to the officers at Blakely City, including the district head of the state police, Chief McCray of the Blakely City police department, the chief of detectives, Sheriff Garton, and a deputy prosecuting attorney.

"Well, what do you think? Sounds like that bunch they want for that Springfield, Missouri, supermarket holdup, doesn't it?" Chief McCray said to the sheriff.

Garton nodded. They showed Joe an FBI report and prison pictures which had arrived just that day. Joe nodded. It was Pedro and Frenchy, all right. They were wanted for the \$8,000 robbery of the Springfield supermarket some ten days before. The man called Frenchy really was one Gaspar Francois, alias Frenchy Beau-

champ. He was a one-time pugilist, had traveled with the athletic show of a carnival, meeting and defeating all comers in boxing and wrestling matches, and had served one year in prison on a stickup conviction. He and Pedro were wanted for an Arizona bank robbery and for the Springfield job. Pedro Gonzales had an equally impressive record, and had served a three-year term on a manslaughter conviction.

Everybody was weary. The investigation would continue next day. Joe drove back to his cabin at Happy Hollow. His head hurt like the devil, and a couple of ribs felt like they were broken. His face was swollen and puffed. He ached in every bone of his body. Just the same, Joe felt a lot better after reading that report on Frenchy. Frenchy wasn't any ordinary punk at all—but a veteran pugilist and still in his physical prime. No wonder Joe was exhausted.

Joe moaned as he crawled into bed. He hurt all over, and his fishing trip had been all messed up by those hoodlums. In the distance, he heard a hoot owl sounding off—with the echoing answer of its mate. Frogs were booming in the button willow marsh that bordered a nearby cove. A fox was yapping on the hillside.

It was an hour before Joe got any sleep. He was thinking again that

it was fortunate Mrs. Willoughby hadn't been left alone with that crummy quartet. No telling what might have happened. And he was thinking about the events of the night—thinking like a cop with thirty years of experience behind him.

Joe was up at seven o'clock. He showered, dressed, and looked out at the lake. The haze had already risen, and there was a slight ripple on the surface. It was just right for fishing, but there would be little fishing for him this day.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Willoughby were at the restaurant. "How about that appendicitis?" Joe asked.

Sam Willoughby grinned sheepishly. "Guess it was a case of the old-fashioned bellyache," he said. The floor had been scrubbed clean. Willoughby nodded toward it. "Thanks Joe. Thanks for taking care of Sue—and for everything."

One or two fishing parties were breakfasting, chatting away happily over ham and eggs about what they expected to catch when they put out on the lake. Joe glanced at them curiously. Real fishermen would have been out on the lake before sunup. Apparently they weren't aware of what had happened in the restaurant during the night. None of them had heard the two shots which had killed Frenchy. They had been fast asleep.

Willoughby brought over a couple of cups of steaming coffee and sat facing Joe in the booth. "Barest kind of a mention of the shooting, Joe, on the early morning news from Blakely City. Too early for their local newsman, I guess."

Mrs. Willoughby came over for Joe's order. "Good morning, Mr. Chaviski," she said, "and thanks!" The heavy coating of face powder she had used didn't conceal her red and swollen eyes.

"Just want to tell you, Joe," said Willoughby, after she had taken the order, "that I'm sorry about what happened last night. They might have killed you. I'll always be grateful that you took care of Sue."

Joe didn't say a word. He just looked at Sam.

"What's the matter, Joe?"

Joe continued looking squarely at Sam without replying.

"Damn it, Joe! What's the matter with you?"

"I thought you were my friend," said Joe.

"I am your friend."

"Then why did you try to frame me last night?"

"What do you mean, try to frame you?"

"Why did you plant that gun in my hand?"

"Who says I planted that gun in your hand?"

"I do," said Joe.

Willoughby dropped his gaze.

"When Sue told you what was about to happen down here you returned to the restaurant and parked at the back. You came in after they had knocked me out—"

Willoughby now looked Joe squarely in the eye. "You've got me dead to right, Joe," he said. "I come in through the back, just as they cleaned out the cash register—those two women and the guy. They run out the front door when they saw me. I went for the gun where I kept it, but it wasn't there. Then I saw it on the floor by you and picked it up. About that time this other guy I hadn't seen before comes through the door like a madman. He picks up that broken bottle they had bashed over your head and was down over you quick as a cat. I yelled at him, but he was going to cut your throat, so I let him have it twice and he just curled up. Then I put in a call for the sheriff, telling him that I was one of the fellows staying in a cottage who had heard the shooting. I stayed and watched over you until I figured the sheriff was about due, then I drove back home with my lights off all the way."

"That still doesn't answer my question," Joe said sternly. "Why did you try to frame me?"

"I figured you wouldn't have no trouble getting out of it, Joe, you

being a respected officer and all that. I guess I made a mistake."

"You sure did," said Joe. "Except for that one little technicality of putting my prints on the gun I don't think you'd have had any trouble at all. A coroner's jury would have cleared you. Now you're in a jam."

"Joe, will you help?"

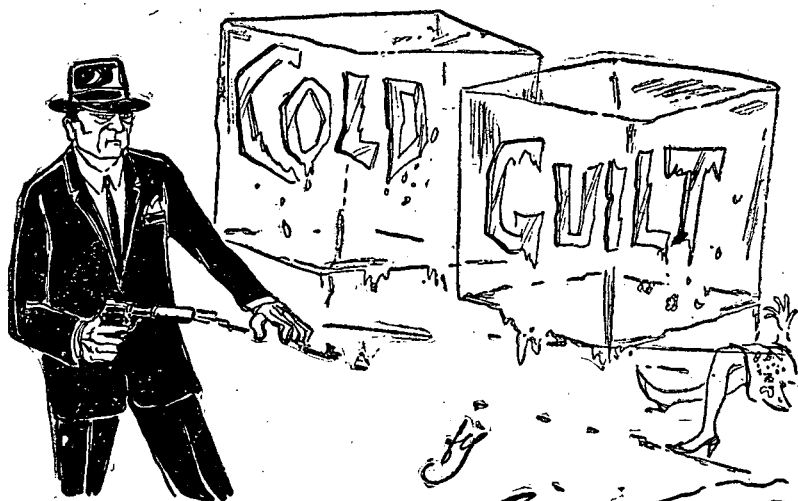
Joe reached over and pressed Sam's hand. "Sure, Sam. After all, you saved my life."

"Sue will be mighty glad to hear that, Joe. She's been all cut up about it. But how did you know it was me and not that dark guy or one of those gals?"

"I didn't know it until I was going to sleep after I'd been over to Blakely City this morning. Something came to me—something I'd been worrying about all the time. You had set up all the chairs we'd knocked over in the scrap, put the place pretty much back in order. I noticed something odd the moment the state patrolman and the sheriff got me up on my feet off the floor, but I had been hit on the head, and I guess I wasn't thinking right at the time. What gang of hoodlums ever cleaned up a place after a fight?"

"Well, I'll be darned, Joe. I guess I just did that through habit while I was waiting. I didn't even know it until you told me just now!"

As a weather vane is mounted to turn freely with the wind, so, apparently, is one's conscience hinged to guilt.



BEFORE I even used the key they'd given me I knew that Foxy Bill Connor was at home. I'd seen his livingroom lights from the street outside, and I could sense the beat of his expensive hi-fi through the heavy door. Foxy liked his music hot and loud.

The lock was oiled and the pass-key worked easily. He never heard the door open. Mixing a drink at the modernistic bar, with his back to the door, he might have seen a shadow in the wall mirror, but nothing more. The si-

lencer on my gun made a soft pop-pop that hardly dented the music.

My first shot broke his spine. The second went in the round of his head above the hairline and raked the brain before it came out between his eyes. Either shot would have killed him, but I'm a pro, and a pro takes no chances.

Edward
Brees

Foxy Bill died fast. He was easy.

Right then I heard a gasp and in the corner of my eye caught a blur in the doorway at the far right of the livingroom. Instinct held for me. I turned and fired as smoothly as at gallery practice. Four shots, low and centered for maximum probability of hits, blew her heart out. You could have covered all four wounds with your hand. Try that in a hurry in a poor light, and you'll appreciate what it is to be a pro.

It had to be fast and it had to be deadly. I didn't have any choice. I couldn't stop; not even when I thought I knew her.

I walked over and looked down and *knew* that I knew her. I'd killed Fran, the only heart that had ever beaten all for me alone.

It didn't matter that that was five years gone, or that she'd hated me before she left. The diamond bracelet I hadn't given her didn't matter now. Even the fact she'd been here with Foxy Bill Connor didn't matter. She was dead and her face all twisted where she hadn't had time to scream. Her hand on the rug, palm up and fingers spread, was as small as a child's.

I didn't put out the light or turn off the music. It was like walking in a cold fog. I took the self-service elevator three flights down,

then went out and walked north toward the heart of the city. In the middle of a bridge I took the gun out and threw it as far as I could into the water. The bottom of the river there was four feet of soft muck and oil. That gun was gone for good.

There was an outdoor phone booth just across the bridge. When the man's voice answered, I said, "Your shipment has left town."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"I'm a pro," I said. "When I say it, I'm sure."

"The rest of the cash will be in your mailbox when you get home."

It was. I picked up the package from the desk clerk at the waterfront high-rise where I lived. I took it upstairs, but didn't open it. Instead, I opened a bottle of whiskey and swallowed a double shot that didn't even burn when it hit my stomach. I couldn't feel anything.

When a red dawn flared across the bay outside my window I knew that I wasn't ever going to feel anything much again. I was locked up in solid ice, at last.

All my life, I'd been getting colder, less than human. Only Fran had ever warmed the cold away, and the thought of Fran. Now I could never touch her again. I couldn't even see her in

my mind. All I could see was four wounds with the blood coming out. Try as I might, that was all. I knew that the cold had come in to stay.

I was called Tony Blue Eyes, for the only inheritance I had from the Irish father I'd never seen. When I grew up I was called Tony-With-The-Gun. My mother's second cousin was Black Pete Angell. When I came out of the reform school he got me a job as gun guard on the hidden catwalk at the old Gambling Club. I was eighteen years old.

When I was twenty, I killed a man for Pete and he gave me a thousand dollars for the job. When I was thirty-five, I killed Pete. This time my price was \$10,000 and expenses. I was a "contract man." I killed on order. I never fouled up a contract and I never talked. You'd be surprised how many people use a contract man. I could afford to live high. I could afford the best.

If only there hadn't been that knot of cold inside me. Now that Fran was gone, I knew that I would never be warm again. Liquor wouldn't do it, nor the hot tropic sun, nor any other woman. I was forty-nine, and I'd never be warm again.

There was only one thing to do. I drove my car down to the police

station and asked for Lieutenant Ryan of the homicide squad. I wanted an honest cop, and I knew that's what he was.

I didn't fool around. "Ryan," I said, "lock me up. I shot Foxy Bill and his woman. Bring in your clerk and take a statement."

"I don't believe it!" he said. "You've gone crazy. Or is it the needle at last?"

"Connors was greedy," I said. "He was holding out on the Syndicate. I got ten thousand in cash for the job. He was shot at eleven o'clock last night with a foreign-made 9mm automatic. One shot took his head off. Need any more?"

"What's the matter with you?" he asked. "What's your game, Tony?"

"You wouldn't understand," I told him. "It's the cold. I guess guys like you never have it. I do. I can't get warm unless I do this. Maybe not even then."

"I think you're crazy."

"I told you you wouldn't understand. Just bring in your man, and let's get it over. You've been trying to get me for years. This is your big chance. Don't let it slip."

"I won't," he said. "This is strictly from dreamland, but I won't let it slip. One thing, though, you have to know your rights."

"I'm a killer and I want to confess. What's rights got to do with that, Ryan? I haven't had any rights in the human race since I was a kid. You know it; and now I know it, too. Let's just get it over."

"Yes, Tony, I know it, but the courts say different. The courts say you've got to be given a chance to get a lawyer. You don't have to talk without one."

"Can't you get it into your thick head I want to talk?"

"That makes no difference. A confession all by itself isn't evidence any more. You change your mind later, and any of the Syndicate's lawyers could crucify the State's Attorney in court. I wouldn't want that to happen, so I'm going to have your lawyer right here when you give your statement."

"Ryan, I don't want any lawyer. I just want to get it over. Can't you understand? I've had it. I want out."

"You'll get your chance, but first I call your regular lawyer. It won't take long."

It didn't. Simon Blanck was the regular Syndicate mouthpiece. Once he heard what Ryan had to say on the phone he must have run every red light on the way to the station. While I waited, nobody searched me, nobody even touched

me. Ryan called in a clerk and a couple of detectives as witnesses, and we all just sat and watched each other.

Simon came upstairs on the run. I guess he'd been thinking about how much I could spill once I started talking. "Keep your mouth shut," he told me. "You'll walk out of here with me tonight. I already called the judge to set bail."

"I don't want out. I want to confess."

"This man is out of his head or drugged," Simon told Ryan. "Three doctors are ready to swear to it . . . or will be by morning. Now, just what have you got on him?"

"A verbal confession," Ryan said wearily.

"You know that's no good, Lieutenant," Simon said. "Even a written confession will be no good when I get him a proper medical examination. What else have you?"

"Not a thing, Counselor. Not a thing. Where's the gun, Tony? Got it with you?"

"I got rid of it before I decided to come in," I said. "You can't recover it. I can describe every detail of the place and the killing. Isn't that enough?"

"No," my lawyer said. "Every cop in the squad room can do that

by now. It's ancient history."

Ryan tried again. "Did you leave fingerprints in the place that we can bring out?"

I shook my head. "I'm a pro. I don't leave prints." I thought for a minute. "I have a passkey to Foxy's pad. I forgot to throw it away."

Simon Blanck cut me short. "You can get passkeys anywhere. By itself it doesn't prove a thing. Besides, I think the officers could have planted that on you before I got here."

"You know better," Ryan said.

"Everybody knows all sorts of things," Blanck said easily. "It's not what we know, Lieutenant. It's what you can prove that counts. Now, if you've really got anything on this man, let's see you prove it. Otherwise, he walks out of here with me."

"I won't go with you."

"You will. I'm your attorney, and I say you're out of your head. You need help, Tony, medical help."

"I want to talk," I said. "You guys are the police. You're supposed to catch murderers. You've caught one. I'm a murderer. I confess. I'll confess to every killing I ever did. Isn't that enough?"

Blanck said, "Not any more, it isn't. Now come along. Some people want to see you."

"He's right, Tony," Ryan said wearily. "You can make a confession if you want, but we can't hold you on just that. Now if you had some proof, or some unimpeachable witness, or something . . ."

"So that's what it takes," I said. I was thinking fast, and all at once it came to me. I'd noticed that the detective standing to the right of my chair was wearing a snub-nosed .38 in a skeleton belt holster. It showed when his jacket swung open.

I stood up, looking as hopeless as I could. Nobody really watched me; even Ryan was too busy being disgusted. He, at least, should have known better. In his own line he's a pro, too.

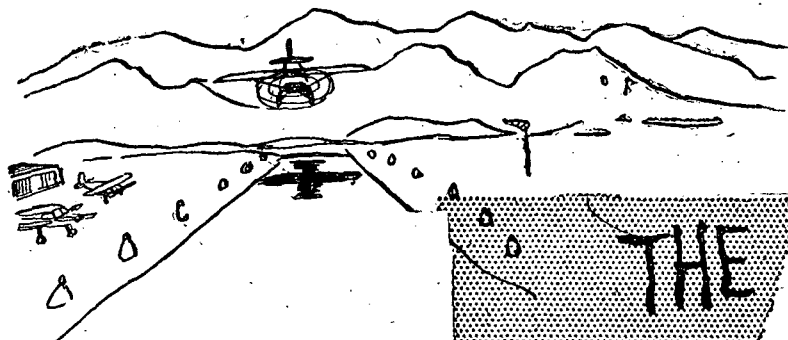
When I moved, I was fast. The detective never felt me lift his gun. I put four shots in Simon Blanck's chest so fast he never stopped smiling. He died smiling. Then I tossed the gun on Ryan's desk.

"You can make this one stick, Lieutenant," I said.

The jury has been out for four hours now. The public defender says they may turn me loose. It's hard to believe a sane man would do what I did.

If the jury declares, "Not guilty by reason of insanity," I'll be put in an asylum—and it will be cold in there.

In defiance of existing laws, six divided by one plus X, compounded by variables M and R, yields a remainder of three and M plus R.



MORNING on the high desert was chilly even in August—early morning, when the day was still sprinkled with stars as big as baseballs and the rough-backed Sierras rimmed the landing strip like the backdrop for a Hollywood extravaganza. But the mountains were real, and so was the cold place in Harry McKay's stomach as he watched the wing lights of a small plane slip out of the baseball constellation and belly down on the landing strip. There wasn't another plane on the field with the engine running. It was a private airport, property of the High Valley Inn, an exclusive desert resort that featured hot and cold swimming pools, an eighteen hole golf

THE SEVENTH MAN

A Novellette
by
Helen Nielsen



course with its own pro, a well stocked stable for the equestrians and a western band electronically equipped to swing into a-go-go if it so pleased the clientele. A collection of privately owned planes was gathered at one end of the field but, aside from a skeleton crew in the administration building, there was no sign of life anywhere except for McKay and his butterfly stomach.

The butterflies were active because Annie Benson Reed was bringing in a cargo of living explosive.

Women with three names usually resembled a before-taking dietetic ad and contributed poetry to metaphysical journals, but Annie resembled Miss Universe and her photo coverage of the world's constantly erupting hotspots had kept ERA magazine at the top of its class for the past five years. Annie had nerves of steel, could write PhD after her name, and knew more about femininity than Cleopatra at her prime. The sound of her sexy voice on a midnight telephone call from El Paso, and the request that he meet her at this unlikely place at five a.m., fired McKay's imagination with the hope of a gay holiday.

But Annie directed his attention to the latest edition of ERA and said, "This is confidential, McKay. I'm bringing a VIP guest. See page

twenty-seven and then make like you bit off your tongue."

Being Annie, she then broke the connection and left McKay stomping about his West Hollywood penthouse in his hand-tailored shorts looking for a magazine. Page twenty-seven of the latest ERA carried a teaser-spread on a forthcoming photo series of Annie Benson Reed's recent trek to Castroland-by-the-sea, and a five-year-old shot of one of the men she hoped to contact, resistance leader Dr. Carlos Ruiz.

Ruiz, now forty-eight, was a husky intellectual with a lot of black hair and a determined chin. The Bearded One had placed a price of one hundred thousand American dollars on his luxuriously adorned skull, and that was an impressive status symbol in anybody's ideological war. McKay read all about it while dressing and had the car headed north on the freeway within the hour after Annie's call. Being Annie, it had been collect.

So it was five o'clock, exactly, and the small plane had completed a perfect landing and taxied to a stop at the near end of the runway. McKay discarded a cigarette he had forgotten to light and hurried forward as the door opened. It was a private plane hired in Miami, and Annie was the first to alight. Even

in an army issue trench coat and flats she looked high fashion. She waved casually and turned her attention back to the plane.

"Please be careful with my uncle," she called into the cabin. "He was shot in the leg in a hunting accident."

It was only a partial lie. Annie didn't have an uncle, and the passenger in a wheelchair, who was now transferred to McKay's car, had been shot in a hunt—the object of which was himself.

Annie's explanation came when they were under way. She glanced at her watch. "Five-ten," she said. "Good. Dr. Ruiz is due at Santa Barbara at seven. Can you make it?" Annie could be as subtle as a depth charge.

"Ruiz?" McKay echoed. "Do you mean that you hustled me out at this uncivilized hour to chauffeur Carlos Ruiz, the tiger of counter-revolution?"

"You're stepping on my cap-tions," Annie said. "Who else could I hustle? I helped Ruiz escape. I bribed the boat captain, paid a passport forger and hired the plane. Now I'm offering you ten thousand dollars to guard the living, breathing body until Dr. Ruiz completes his mission and returns from whence he came—still living and breathing."

The figure reflected in the rear-

view mirror wore dark glasses and a heavy growth of beard, but he smiled at the sound of the conversation, and it was the smile of a man who had cheated death and come up with a handful of trumps.

"If that really is Ruiz," McKay parried, "why isn't he at the ERA building in New York?"

"Where every Castro agent in New York would be looking for him?" Annie scoffed.

"There has to be something in it for you."

"I'm patriotic. Also, I get a Pulitzer Prize for my book when our side comes up a winner."

That was the way it was with Annie Benson Reed. You got a long distance call at midnight and then, instead of a little fun, ended up with a lapful of assassin bait.

Harry McKay considered the possible complications and said, "Make it twenty thousand dollars and you've got a deal."

"I'm not authorized to go over fifteen thousand," Annie countered.

"So why were you holding out the extra five?"

Annie leaned close to him and directed one soft hand into the inner pocket of his new Norfolk jacket. She remembered where he kept his gold cigarette case and removed it with the dexterity of a professional dip. "I've been in the

back country for a month," she said. "I need a new permanent wave."

At seven o'clock McKay delivered Ruiz, whose sole piece of luggage was a black leather medical bag, to an estate on the outskirts of Santa Barbara. This was rich, clean country where white stucco walls had no bullet holes and rubber hoses were used for watering lawns and rose bushes. The property was owned by a native Californian named Pete Morales, whose ancestors had owned half the county before Yankee imperialists requisitioned the area so future engineers would have room to build freeways.

Pete bore no scars of deprivation, but he had developed strong forearm muscles from carrying his share of the fruits of capitalism to the bank. He was a handsome, articulate man of about forty-five, a widower and father of an eighteen-year-old daughter, Nita, who majored in art and could have posed for the Aphrodite of Rhodes except that she was more expensively dressed. A Spanish-speaking housekeeper and a Japanese gardener who never spoke completed the household. These things McKay noted as Ruiz was being installed in the guest room of Morales' modest twelve-room hacienda.

Ruiz declined a doctor. He was

himself a surgeon and had dressed his own wound. He asked for hot water, fresh bandages and a few hours' sleep. His room was on the second floor and the windows were protected by decorative grillwork. There was no reason to believe the house was being watched. Morales was politically mute. It was for this reason that he had been chosen as host for Ruiz. Furthermore, as a successful businessman he was accustomed to entertaining clients. Visitors would attract no attention.

These were things McKay learned from Annie when he drove her back to his apartment. She resented missing out on the story, but her face was appearing in the current issue of ERA, and one guest too many could spoil the party.

She entered the penthouse and yawned. "You've had the place redecorated," she said. "I like the Mondrian. Where do I sleep?"

McKay took her to his bedroom where the sheets were still mussed from his own hurried departure, but Annie didn't mind. She took off the trench coat and dropped it on the floor, kicked off the flats and collapsed on the bed. She was wearing a green shirt and skirt and resembled a Girl Scout with battle fatigue.

"Some other time," she murmured, "I will listen to the story of

your charming life, Harry McKay."

She pronounced it McKye, to rhyme with lie, which was correct. McKay pulled a blanket over her, and she was already asleep.

Annie Benson Reed knew the story of his life. It was as different from hers as Park Avenue is from South Figueroa. But Annie was no snob. McKay made certain his auto insurance was paid up and then left the keys to his car on the bedside table. A white convertible was conspicuous on a job like this. He called a rental agency to order a black sedan.

"We try harder—" the agency girl began.

"So do I," McKay said. "Hell, isn't it?"

Then he waited and wondered, as he checked the cartridge chamber in his snub-nosed police special, what his old boss, Lieutenant Sommers, would say if he knew Harry McKay was protecting the life of the most vulnerable visitor the state had entertained since Khrushchev didn't get to Disneyland, and nobody had alerted the boys in blue. McKay's conscience bothered him not at all. He had become a policeman after two years' service in Korea, and remained on the force just long enough to learn that opportunities were unlimited for a bright young man without a college degree if he kept his eyes and

ears open and his mouth shut. The taxpayer couldn't afford much protection, but others, with interests sometimes contrary to the taxpayers, could and did. The war had taught McKay to live for the moment and to make that moment as pleasant as possible. The taxpayers, few of whom are noted for their gratitude, had taught him that being shot at for making fifty thousand dollars a year was no more dangerous than being shot at for making nine thousand dollars a year. McKay didn't try to change the world; he just tried to survive in it.

When the car was delivered, McKay drove back to Morales' place and was installed in the unoccupied servants' quarters above Nita's studio. It gave him a good view of the approach to the house and an even better view of Nita who, in stretch pants and jersey, was something Annie Benson Reed would have hated on sight. But Nita was already spoken for—and loudly. From the stairway leading up to the loft, McKay eavesdropped on what had all the sound and fury of a lovers' quarrel.

"I don't care what your father thinks of me! It's not your father I get insomnia over!"

The voice was masculine; the viewpoint logical. McKay ventured a step farther down the stairs.

"It's not *you*," Nita insisted, "and it's not Father. It's just that I don't want to commit myself."

"Since when? You were ready enough to commit yourself last summer when we were on the sit-ins!"

"To the *cause*," Nita said, "but not to any personal commitment. I'm just not ready."

By this time McKay could see the male half of the couple. He, too, wore stretch pants and a jersey, but there the resemblance ended. He was at least six feet tall, had shaggy blond hair and a slight blond fuzz on his chin. He also had an intense gleam in his big blue eyes.

"Not personal!" he yelled. "Since when?"

"Roger, please! We have a house guest."

Nita spotted McKay on the stairs and a big cool came on. McKay turned up his coat collar and exited quickly in the direction of the main house. There he found Morales and learned that Roger Astin was a college friend of Nita's, active in campus leftist groups and considered harmless by the host.

"At his age I did the same things," Morales laughed. "It's a lot healthier than swallowing goldfish."

"I hope he doesn't know Ruiz is here," McKay said.

"Of course he doesn't! Neither does Nita. She thinks he's a distant cousin. Relax, McKay. Nothing can happen here."

Morales' confidence reassured McKay not in the least. Fifteen thousand dollars was not the kind of fee a man drew when nothing happened.

He was right. Ruiz recovered quickly from his journey and demanded a conference that same evening. When McKay and Morales were in the room, the door securely locked behind them, he asked McKay to hand him the surgical case that had been left on the dresser. It was unusually heavy.

"What are you carrying in this bag?" McKay asked. "A bomb?"

Ruiz took the bag and smiled. He had bathed, shaved and borrowed one of Morales' clean white shirts. Except for understandable aging and a degree of emaciation, he was very much like the five-year-old photos Annie had taken.

"More powerful than a bomb, Senor McKay," he said. "What I carry in this bag is the implementation of an idea, and an idea is always the most powerful force in any age."

Then Ruiz opened the bag. It contained a tray filled with surgical instruments, antiseptics and drugs. He removed the tray and placed it on a table beside his

wheelchair. Then, from under the tray, he removed a neatly wrapped stack of thousand-dollar bills.

"I have here fifteen thousand dollars in United States currency," he said. "Morales, I give this to you. It is McKay's fee. You will give him five thousand tonight and the rest when the mission is completed. This bag also contains forty more packets exactly like the one you have—\$600,000 in all. It is what remains of almost \$1,000,000 collected in private subscription before the revolution for the construction of a hospital in my village. Some of the money was spent for food and supplies for the resistance forces, some for transportation. What remains is to be distributed among the six most important men active in our behalf in this country, men who have escaped the tyranny to carry on the struggle here.

"Your assignment, McKay, is to contact these men and get them to this house. It must be done carefully. They are men with prices on their heads, too, but they have learned to avoid detection or, perhaps, the revolution has decided they are no longer important. Still, they may be watched. If it were known that they were coming here to meet me—well, do you have an imagination, Senor McKay?"

"A vivid one," McKay said.

"Yes. I see that you have, and

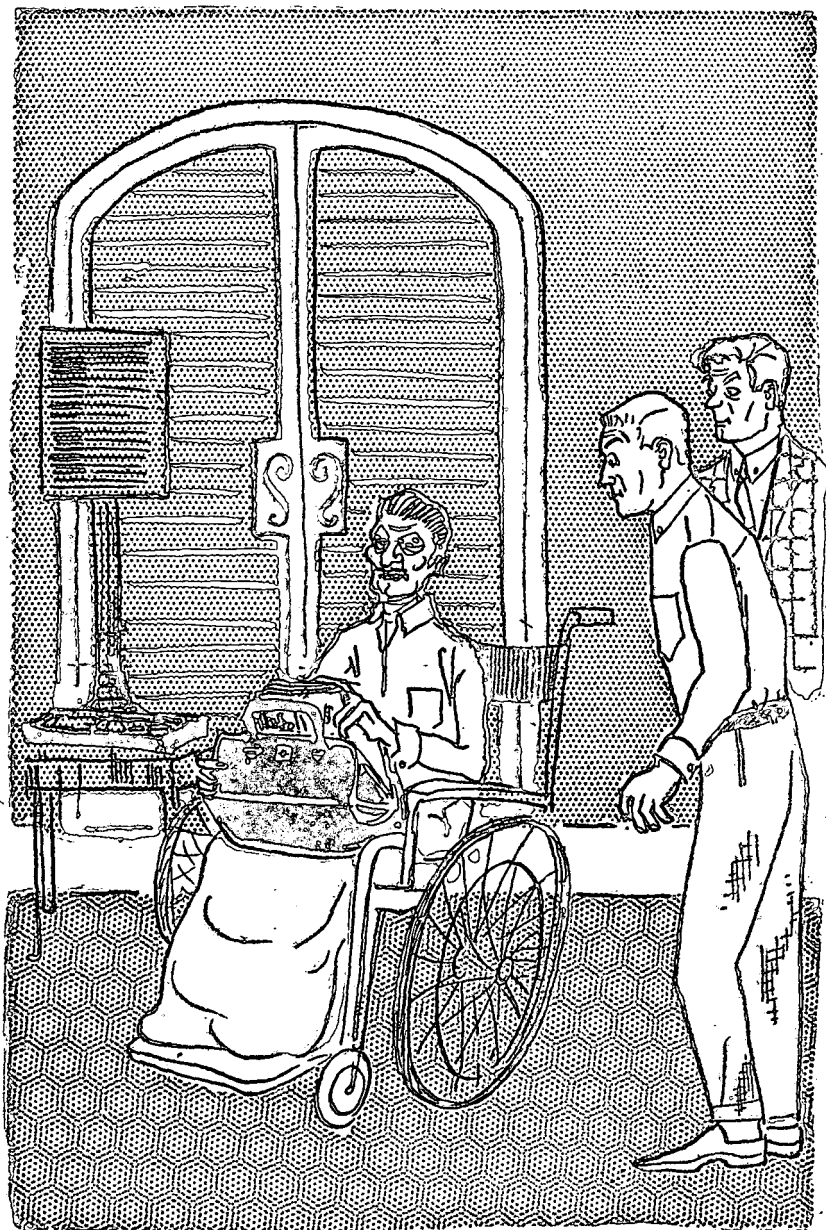
so I will leave the *modus operandi* in your hands. But my own time is limited. I must have these men here as soon as arrangements can be made."

Ruiz then handed McKay a list of six names: Dr. Luis Cordova, Boston, Mass., Neurologist; Juan Allende, Washington, D.C., Journalist; Jaime Lopez, New York City, Decorator; Fernando Valdez, New Orleans, La., Lawyer; Ernesto Torres, Galveston, Texas, Importer; Ricardo Gutzman, San Francisco, Calif., Public Relations.

That was the job. While Annie pounded her lovely pink ear on Harry McKay's percale pillowcases, Harry McKay had nothing to do but locate six hot refugees and set up a meeting of the alumni in Pete Morales' guest room. No indication was given as to whether or not the names and occupations were genuine or assumed as cover for other activities, and there were no addresses.

"You forgot General Garcia," McKay said, but Ruiz was in no mood for levity. He reached back into the bag and took out a small key ring from which hung seven safe keys. Carefully detaching six of the keys, he gave them to McKay.

"At one time," he explained, "each of these men had access to the money in this bag. It was then



in a safe in a warehouse that belonged to my older brother, Tomas Ruiz. My brother was killed, but not before he could send these keys to me. That is how I was able to recover the money. Now you have the keys to establish identification. Proceed, Senor McKay."

The interview was over. McKay considered the problem over a bloody mary and scrambled egg lunch. He wasn't being paid to mail six keys to six men. He had to make positive identification, and that meant personal contact. He drove back to West Hollywood where he knew a job shop printer who would work around the clock with proper incentive. After placing his order, he spent the rest of the day trying to lure Annie out of a beauty salon. He succeeded in time for dinner at a Strip restaurant, followed by a grand tour of the in-group niteries which brought them back to the penthouse shortly before dawn.

Annie looked like an angel and smelled like the duty-free level of Le Bourget Airport. McKay buried his face in her hair and began dancing her toward the bedroom. She smiled coyly.

"The wages of sin are death," she said.

"I know," McKay murmured, "but think of the fringe benefits."

She was thinking when the tele-

phone broke in. McKay answered.

The printer said, "The forms you ordered are ready, Mr. McKay."

That was the trouble with job printers. They took their work too seriously. The mood was broken. Annie had to know what he was planning to do and, by the time he told her, it was daylight and he had just enough time for a shower and a quick change of clothes before collecting the forms and catching the early plane for Boston.

He checked out Cordova's address from a medical directory and presented himself at the doctor's door, pencil and survey sheet in hand.

"Dr. Cordova," he began, "I represent the National Home Owner's Institute Survey. I want to ask a few questions."

Cordova was a muscular, lantern-jawed individual who resembled a professional wrestler more than a physician. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not in practice anymore, and I don't own a house."

"Great!" McKay exclaimed. "That's one of the facts the survey wants to know. Now, if you did own a house, where would you like to have it located? Boston? New York? Havana?"

Cordova's eyes reacted to Havana, and so McKay took one of the keys from his pocket. This time there was no mistake. Recognition

was instantaneous. McKay lettered a note on the pad and then ripped out the sheet under the carbon and handed it, together with the key, to Cordova.

"Your receipt," he said, "and thank you for your cooperation. The Institute will be waiting to hear from you."

There was safety in minimal conversation. McKay left Cordova staring at the piece of paper on which was printed: P. MORALES, RAT & INSECT EXTERMINATOR, Moreno's Santa Barbara address, and the time at which Cordova was expected. The note was signed: C. Ruiz, Exterminating Engineer.

McKay then caught a cab to the airport and flew to New York where he repeated the process at the shop of Jaime Lopez. He took a late plane to Washington, slept at the city terminal hotel and located Allende at his morning coffee break. Journalists are nosy people, but McKay was still careful not to risk remarks that might be recorded if the office were bugged. He got away in good time on his New Orleans flight. A wild wind was blowing at the airport. There was talk of a hurricane that everybody hoped would detour the coast, but McKay had no time for weather. He located Valdez' office in the Latin Quarter and delivered

his survey speech, the receipt and the key. He returned to the airport to find the planes still flying, and within minutes was on his way to Galveston. It was a night flight. He slept some on the plane and a few hours more in the city. Then, after friendly banter with the dark-eyed receptionist in Torres' office, learned on what golf course he could be found with what four-some. He intercepted his man at the clubhouse, completed his mission, and caught the next plane to San Francisco. Gutzman was the sixth man. Polished and cool, he developed sweat glands at the mere sight of the safe key. Six tries and six bull's-eyes. McKay left his little note and planed back to Los Angeles International where he picked up another car.

"And don't tell me how hard you try," he warned the girl at the rental desk, "or I may cry all over your lovely shoulder."

Then he drove back to Morales' estate and reported to Ruiz.

"You have done well," Ruiz acknowledged, "but for one thing. You didn't learn by what means and routes my brother's friends are coming."

"I didn't want to know," McKay said. "What I don't know, I can't tell. Have you ever had your arm twisted by an expert, Senor Ruiz?"

Ruiz' humorless smile was suffi-

cient answer. He again asked for the heavyweight bag on the dresser, and McKay left him clutching it to his chest. He probably had a sentimental attachment for that \$600,000. McKay had nothing to do now for the next twenty-four hours, or until H-hour for Ruiz' exclusive key club, but listen to Nita explain the difference between cubism and abstract expressionism, or, how to dig chaos and learn to love it. McKay would rather have dug Nita, but her lightly bearded swain developed a protective instinct that bristled at the sight of him. Archly, and in a manner indicating his own intellectual superiority, Roger queried McKay's attitude on Vietnam, proliferation and the abuse of Communist terrorists by resentful victims.

"I have a simple foreign policy," McKay answered. "When in Rome, don't feed the lions."

Persona non grata at ground level, McKay ascended to the loft apartment and stretched out on the bed. He was tired, but he wouldn't completely relax until the six men had come and gone. He ran the job over in his mind. He had sent no wires, no letters, and engaged in no conversation that would have made sense to an eavesdropper. He had not communicated with Morales while he was

away, or left any detail in the hands of a subordinate. International intrigue wasn't the forte of an ex-cop, but if he translated the patriots and the Commies into clients and criminals it was all the same. The time for the reunion was eight p.m. PST of the following day, which gave everybody ample time. McKay checked his gun again, kicked off his shoes and slept until midnight.

But his mind never slept. McKay awakened because the wind was blowing, and something in his nervous system remembered wind and was uneasy. He got out of bed and stumbled about in his stocking feet until he found the bar tucked in one end of a coffee table. Morales was a man after his own taste. McKay dumped an imitation rose out of a decorative brandy snifter and put it to more practical use. The mellow warmth dissolved the last fragment of sleep and left him wondering why his nerve ends were vibrating like a shim steel coil. Intuition, somebody had said, was wisdom in a hurry. He located a radio disguised as a Spanish sea chest and tuned in a late newscast. The hurricane hadn't bypassed Louisiana. The airport was closed and nobody was flying in or out.

It was worse in the morning. Galveston was getting a piece of the action, and flight schedules were

erratic as far east as Washington, D. C. Ruiz didn't like the development at all. It was his party and he wanted all the guests to arrive at one time.

"Cool it," McKay suggested. "Even Harry McKay can't control the weather. If we have stragglers, keep the party going a few days."

But Ruiz had been shot at too many times to retain a sense of humor.

Ricardo Gutzman was the first to arrive. He came in his own car, a frosted blue sedan with a black vinyl top. He wore the Italian silk suit and the bland smile that symbolized his profession, but the fighter look was back in his eyes. Cordova and Lopez arrived together, having taken the same plane from the east coast and hired a limousine at the airport. Morales' courtyard was beginning to resemble a used car lot in Hollywood, and bugles were blowing in the guest room. Three of Ruiz' keys had been returned. H-hour arrived, and busy men couldn't wait. McKay cooled his heels in the courtyard while Ruiz explained his plans and distributed the money. What was said between them was something he would never know, and that was fine with McKay. He wasn't interested in sharing secrets. He was interested in the rest of his fee.

Two hours later, Gutzman, Cordova and Lopez returned to the courtyard. They chatted quietly in Spanish and then paired off, with Dr. Cordova driving to San Francisco with Gutzman, and Lopez returning to the airport in the limousine. Nobody paid any attention to McKay, and he noted the departure only because it brought him halfway home to ten thousand dollars.

He didn't feel so smug about it in the morning. By that time Gutzman, Cordova and Lopez were dead.

There was more than one kind of hurricane. The second one hit McKay at five a.m. when he was still working on the brandy and trying to convince himself there was no reason for his edgy nerves. An all night disc jockey who played an occasional recording between commercials gave hourly newscasts. At that hour the top story was the crash of an east-bound airliner at St. Louis with all aboard killed and Jaime Lopez of New York City listed as a victim. McKay capped the brandy bottle and hurried downstairs. A light was still showing in Nita's studio, and Roger Astin's battered sports car was parked in the driveway. Morales had to be awakened in order to get word to Ruiz, and Ruiz, when he heard the news,

took it quite like the stoic he was.

"It may be incidental," McKay said, "but I have to ask a question. Was Lopez carrying \$100,000?"

Ruiz nodded. "In a black attache case," he acknowledged. "Initialed. Jaime Lopez was a bit theatrical."

"Then I have to leave you nice people," McKay concluded.

He drove back to the West Hollywood penthouse and hustled Annie out of bed. Annie Benson Reed of ERA could get more information on that wrecked liner than Harry McKay. The first stop was the telephoto machine at Annie's west coast office. The plane had exploded as it took off after a scheduled stop. The cockpit and most of the fuselage resembled a badly opened sardine can, but firefighting equipment had been handy enough to keep it from being gutted.

They caught the next plane to St. Louis, and Annie asked the right questions of the right people. They examined the baggage recovered from the crash—both checked and hand baggage. There was no black attache case, initialed or otherwise. They checked out the morgue and found recognizable pieces of Lopez, plus fragments of a dark suit, a broken wristwatch and a completely intact wallet and key holder. There were eighty-seven dollars in the wallet and a

set of auto keys, door keys, and one small luggage key in the holder.

"Attache case?" Annie suggested.

"Probably. Lopez made a fast trip. An electric shaver and a clean shirt were about all he needed in the way of luggage."

"Do you think the plane was sabotaged so somebody could cop Jaime's \$100,000?" she asked.

"No. If the plane were sabotaged, it was so somebody could eliminate Jaime."

They checked the airline passenger lists and learned that five passengers had alighted at St. Louis. McKay got their names and contacted a local detective agency for a preliminary check. By that time Annie had them both booked on a return flight to Los Angeles, and the Gulf area was picking itself out of the hurricane ruins and getting back to normal. The significant thing, although McKay didn't mention this to Annie, was that no locker key was found on Lopez' body. He hadn't left the case in safekeeping anywhere en route. He hadn't been worried, and that was a mistake—a big mistake.

McKay didn't realize how big until he deposited Annie at the penthouse and drove back to Morales' estate. It seemed that Ricardo Gutzman had a wife. When her

husband failed to return after telephoning from a roadside pay phone that he was on his way home with an old college friend, she notified the police. The highway patrol located the frosted blue sedan in a ravine on the Gaviota Pass. It appeared to have been sideswiped by a speeding object in the Queen Mary class, and both Gutzman and Cordova were dead.

McKay had just completed questioning the authorities about what was found on the bodies of the dead men when Lieutenant Sommers made the scene. Sommers' area was Los Angeles, but Dr. Cordova had arrived at International on the same flight with Jaime Lopez who later died in a crash at St. Louis. Moreover, the two men had hired a limousine at the same airport rental agency that supplied McKay's car. A coincidence like that roused the lieutenant's curiosity.

"I thought you were writing your memoirs," Sommers said acidly.

To Lieutenant Sommers, McKay had been a traitor from the day he turned in his badge for the more lucrative profession of guarding the bodies, possessions and extracurricular activities of the carriage trade.

"I can't finish," McKay said. "I need a smash ending."

"You may get it sooner than you think. What do you know about Gutzman and Cordova?"

"They're dead," McKay answered.

"Why?"

"Ask the coroner."

"That's not what I mean and you know it! My office received a call from Washington about these men. The FBI is sending out a special investigator on the next flight."

Washington. The hurricane was over and the airlines were operating on schedule again. There was no time to lose.

"Excuse me," McKay said. "I'm overparked. Drop by my apartment someday and we'll talk about it."

Fast legwork got him back to his car before Sommers could react. The coroner would attribute the deaths to a hit and run accident, but McKay knew better. Somebody had reached the car after the crash and removed \$200,000.

Ruiz took the news hard. "Of course I gave Cordova and Gutzman money," he said. "Gutzman was especially important. A man in his field makes important connections."

"He connected all right," McKay mused. "Gaviota Pass isn't a thirty minute drive from this house. Even if he spent ten minutes in

that phone booth, he still had to be set up for the wreck from the minute he pulled out of this driveway. Why was Cordova with him?"

"They were old friends. Cordova decided to spend a few days in San Francisco and fly back to Boston from there. López had a business conference in New York City and had to return immediately. Three men have been killed, Señor McKay. Do you realize what this means?"

"It means three down and three to go," McKay said.

There had been a leak. McKay checked Ruiz' room carefully. There was no telephone and no intercom equipment. It wasn't bugged, and heavy drapes had been drawn during the meeting making it impossible for anyone to see through the windows even with high-powered binoculars. Morales had two servants, the housekeeper and the gardener. The gardener was a non-resident employee who hadn't been near the property the day of the meeting, and the housekeeper spent her free time enthusiastically watching the television set in her room in spite of, and perhaps because of, an inability to understand more than the most basic English. She couldn't identify Ruiz' callers by name, and was under the impression that the house guest was a relative from

some country in South America.

"You can't suspect Maria!" Morales insisted. "She's never even been in the room with Ruiz. She prepares his food and I take it up to him—or Nita does."

"Nita?" McKay reflected.

"Of course, you may suspect me. I could have offered my house to Ruiz in order to lure the counter-revolutionaries to their deaths. The flaw in that theory is that I had no idea what Ruiz meant to do here, and I didn't see his list of names until you did."

"About Nita," McKay said. "How serious is this thing she has going with Roger Astin?"

Morales looked bewildered. A parent was always the last to know. McKay decided not to mention the sports car in the driveway at five a.m., and continued his investigation elsewhere.

Astin did have a police record. He had been picked up in a couple of sit-ins and narrowly escaped a felony charge when one demonstration turned into a riot. His draft card was intact, but some of his campus associates were now on the attorney general's subversive list, and young blood flows hot and heedless. Astin wouldn't be the first idealist used by a ruthless power group.

But Roger Astin had never seen the list of names, and he couldn't

have known where McKay had gone on his brief roundup. Furthermore, the killers of Cordova, Lopez and Gutzman weren't campus theorists; they were fanatics who didn't mind destroying a planeload of passengers to kill one man. And they still had three men to kill.

McKay returned to his quarters over the garage. He checked and, finding it free from bugs, put in a call to the detective agency in St. Louis. His man there had a report on the five passengers who left the plane before the crash. Four were solid citizens. The fifth, one Edward Smith, had ticketed in Los Angeles, giving a fictitious home address. McKay decided to leave Mr. Smith to the CAA and put in a second call to Annie.

"Drop whatever you're doing," he said, "and look in the lower right-hand drawer of my desk. You'll find a small leather kit—brown leather. Handle with care and bring it up to the Biltmore bar at four this afternoon. I'll buy you a drink."

Annie was reliable. Her fancy hairdo was a mess after the St. Louis escapade, but her spirits were high. They were even higher after a brace of whisky sours.

"You never did tell me how you met Ruiz in Cuba," McKay said.

"You can read about it in my

book," Annie answered playfully.

"But somebody had to make the introduction and set up the escape."

"Several men with beards. All bearded men look alike to me."

"One of them could have known about the \$600,000 and the list of names," McKay insisted.

Annie didn't need a diagram. "Do you think Ruiz was allowed to escape just so he could finger



the hot and elusive 'secret six'?"

"It's possible. I've been thinking about that list. Each of the men I contacted was located in a major port of entry to the United States. I think the names and professions are fronts to cover anti-Castro activities in progress for some time. Only the keys to a dead man's safe could smoke them out. Do you know what Ruiz' plans were if this operation had gone off as scheduled?"

"To return to Cuba as soon as possible. He asked me to arrange

for another plane to be waiting.”

“Don’t,” McKay said. “I’m sentimental. I like you all in one piece—not scattered about like Lopez.”

He opened the leather case she had brought him and inspected the electronic equipment it contained. Ruiz’ room wasn’t bugged, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t be bugged. Logically, the three men who hadn’t made the first meeting would now be en route. McKay had to know what would be said in the meeting with Ruiz.

“But shouldn’t we warn them not to come?” Annie suggested.

“I don’t think there’s time. And who would we warn? How do we know that Allende, or Valdez, or Torres isn’t playing both sides of the fence? There has to be a contact in the States who knew about that eight o’clock conference. The killings that followed weren’t spontaneous.”

“Then it’s lucky there was a hurricane,” Annie said, “or it would have been all over the first night.”

McKay bought Annie two cups of coffee after that remark. A woman who could think so clearly on a few whisky sours might lose the knack with one more.

That night McKay bribed Maria with a little Scottish flattery couched in high school Spanish and took up the dinner tray himself. Once in the room with Ruiz,

it was easy to divert his attention and install the bugging device. Then he chatted for a while over a free Havana cigar.

“I don’t hold you responsible for what has happened, Senor McKay,” Ruiz explained. “You followed my instructions exactly.”

“But I have pride,” McKay said. “I don’t like it when a job blows up in my face. And I don’t intend to lose the last three men. Why don’t you hold back on the money, Dr. Ruiz? I could put the bag in a safety deposit box—”

McKay merely gestured toward the bag; he didn’t touch it, but suddenly there was something so close to madness in the doctor’s eyes that McKay was left wondering how much privation and torture a human could endure without mental damage. He didn’t mention the money in the bag again. He only hoped Ruiz would reconsider.

He returned to his room and tested the receiver. He could hear Ruiz moving about; a faucet ran in the bathroom; a door opened and closed. The equipment was working. McKay switched off the receiver and watched the driveway for a few minutes. Too tense to remain motionless, he switched on the radio hoping to get a newscast, but now there was no sound but static on the entire waveband. It

was expensive equipment—too complicated for an amateur to adjust. He switched the set off and on several times but the static remained. It was getting dark. McKay smoked a cigarette and watched the driveway for a while, and then he tested the transmitter in Ruiz' room again. Now he heard a man's voice speaking in too precise English:

"Yes, I heard it all. There was \$150,000 recovered from a locker in the New York City air terminal—as promised. One half of the contract has been completed . . . No, I see no reason not to continue. Police investigations are slow. We have time on our side. Stand by for further instructions."

There was no further dialogue. McKay heard less shocking sounds: a lock snapped shut, a wheelchair rolled across the floor, then silence. He switched off the receiver and stared at the pattern in the rug until his mind could cope with what he had heard. There was no telephone in the room, but Ruiz had been talking to someone. He tried the radio once more. Now there was no static. The electronic interference was gone. There was only one explanation for that.

McKay was reaching for the telephone when headlights appeared in the driveway below. It was too

late then to call for help. The lights blinked off and he watched three men walk to the front door of Morales' house. McKay switched on his receiver again and followed as much of the conversation between Ruiz and his three callers as his limited Spanish would allow. All it really meant was that three more men were being fitted for quick coffins. He switched off the receiver and took out his gun. He walked downstairs to where Nita was stretching canvas over a wooden frame. Luckily, her semi-bearded swain was nowhere in sight.

"What you're doing can wait," McKay said quietly. "I need a guide. Is there a rear stairway to Ruiz' room?"

There was a rear stairway. McKay wanted to avoid meeting Morales. There was no time for explanations. He took Nita with him and made her answer the query from within when he rapped on the door.

"It's Nita Morales," she said. "I must see Dr. Ruiz at once. My father says it's important."

It was important. McKay's gun was pointed at the small of her back. When the door opened, he pushed her aside and shifted his aim to the rib cage of the startled Ernesto Torres of Galveston.

"But you're the one who brought the key!" Torres gasped. "Who is

this devil of a man, Dr. Ruiz?"

"I can think of a better question," McKay said. "Who is Ruiz, and why does he have a radio transmitter hidden in the bottom of that three-tiered surgical kit?"

McKay was watching the face of the man who called himself Carlos Ruiz; that was why he didn't see the gun in Allende's hand. And Allende wasn't listening. He was reacting. He pushed Torres aside and fired just as McKay's gun lashed down across his wrist. The shot went wild and the gun clattered to the floor. Now the only weapon in the room was in McKay's hand.

"Open the bag, Ruiz, and contact the man you were speaking to just before company came," he ordered. "Talk to him some more about the \$150,000 stashed away in a locker in the New York City air terminal."

McKay said it nicely, but suddenly the bag was hurtling toward his head, the wheelchair was rolling toward the doorway and the floor was rushing up to meet his eyeballs. He rolled sideways and fired at the chair. Ruiz was no longer in it. Incredibly, he was stumbling down the front stairs on one wounded leg. Morales was waiting below. Pushing him aside, Ruiz wrenched open the front door and ran out into the night.

Halfway to the rented sedan he was drenched with light.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Lieutenant Sommers ordered.

Ruiz stopped. For a moment he was blinded by the light, and then he must have seen Sommers and the uniformed man moving toward him. He whirled about. Now McKay stood in the lighted doorway. Ruiz was trapped. His body sagged submissively and one hand flicked toward his mouth. When he collapsed it was for the last time. He had taken cyanide.

Hours later McKay relaxed in his own bed with an ice bag covering the lump on his head left by the loaded medical kit, and his eyes fixed on the angelic face of Annie Benson Reed. He almost wished that Allende's shot had nicked him. Annie was being all woman. He hadn't known about the Florence Nightingale side of her nature.

"I got some terrific shots of Ruiz taking the cyanide," she said. "Right from the instant his hand went to his mouth until the instant he died."

Florence Nightingale vanished.

"Syndicate them and make a comic strip," McKay suggested. "And he wasn't Carlos Ruiz."

"I know. Carlos is dead. Our Ruiz was Tomas, the brother. They are on opposite sides. Carlos

raised the money for the hospital, and when he was finally killed the names of his friends and the six extra keys were found with the funds. Then I came along looking for the legendary Carlos, and Tomas conceived the idea of using me to get him into the States and liquidate the men on the list. He even let himself be wounded in the leg to make it look good . . . Does your head still hurt?"

"Only when I think," McKay said. "How did you learn all this?"

"From Sommers. He has a one-track mind. He watched that car leasing agency at International. When three more men with Spanish names rented a sedan he tailed them. That's how he happened to be waiting outside when Tomas tried to escape."

"And you?"

"I followed you. Annie Where-The-Action-Is Reed, they call me. The FBI found that locker in the New York air terminal and caught the man who came to pick up the \$150,000. He was one of Tomas' agents. He made a deal with some professional killers even before the rigged escape from Cuba. It was cute. Tomas gave \$100,000 each to Cordova, Lopez and Gutzman, and then contacted the killers by radio as soon as the three men left Morales' place. The killers did their work, relieved the victims of

the loot and then had one half the sum deposited in the locker as a guarantee the job was completed."

"Then the dead men paid their own executioners," McKay reflected. "Why didn't the killers keep all the money?"

"And ruin their image? Harry McKay, I'm ashamed of you! They were businessmen, and a contract is a contract. Which reminds me, I have your \$10,000. Morales was delighted to get rid of it."

McKay could believe that. And now he could understand why Ruiz had been so anxious to get all six men at the house on the same night. If it hadn't been for a hurricane they would all be dead, and Annie Benson Reed would be hustling the wrong Ruiz out of the country to save his worthless life.

"How is Nita?" he asked.

Annie stopped smiling. "With her hirsute friend," she said, "still dreaming of a painless paradise where freedom comes with two box tops or a reasonable facsimile. She's not your type, Harry. I know these arty college girls. Naive. Simple. Dull."

McKay drew Annie down on the bed with him. She was jealous, and that made her much more attractive than Florence Nightingale.

"The time has come," he murmured in her pink ear, "to tell you the story of my life . . ."

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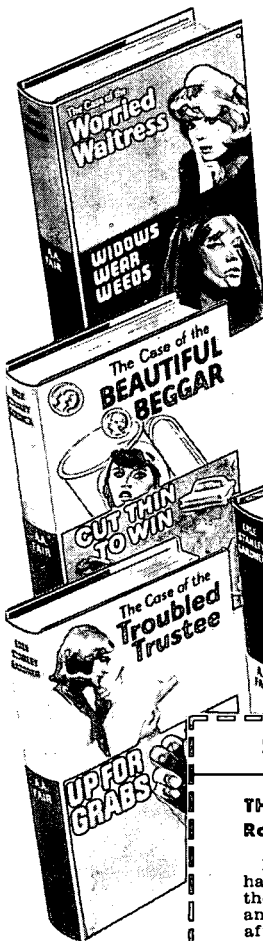
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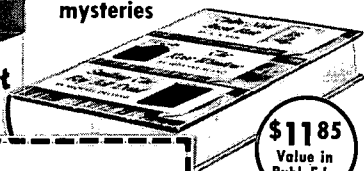
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